WII U REPORT UBISOFT BEATS NINTENDO AT ITS OWN GAME

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Although it may not be in the most traditional sense, the next-generation is here. Epic's Unreal Engine 4 demo, LucasArts' incredible *Star Wars 1313* footage and Square Enix's potential new *Final Fantasy* are all windows into what publishers and developers hope a new era of videogaming will bring.

It's Epic's vision that's the most important, however. It was well-reported that, when Microsoft was putting the final touches on the Xbox 360, the North Carolina studio's desire for more RAM, backed up the visual power of *Gears Of War*, was enough to convince the console developers that it was the right thing to do.

With that in mind – and considering how Unreal Engine 3 has been the cornerstone of development throughout the current console generation – it comes as little surprise that Epic is leading the charge towards the next hardware cycle, and offering a hint of what to expect when the next Xbox and PlayStation are unveiled.

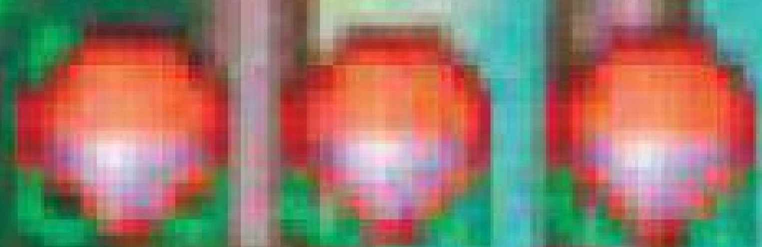
Even with the excitement that will bring, though, you'd be a fool to ignore the current generation's swansong, and this issue's bulging previews section offers a tantalising glimpse of the games we can expect to enjoy over the next 12-18 months. With all-powerful sequels standing shoulder-to-shoulder with eye-opening new IP, I'd be baffled if there wasn't something that had, at the very least, piqued your interest.

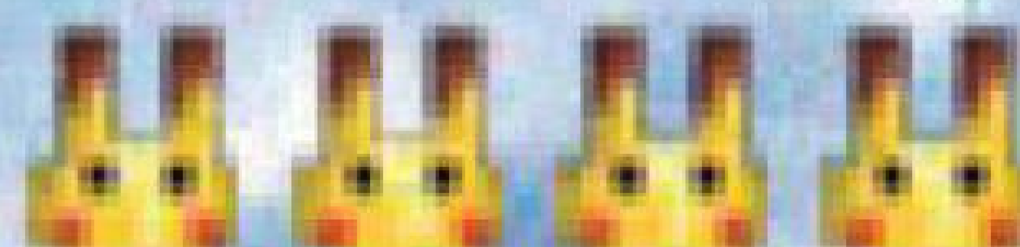
Enjoy the issue,

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF




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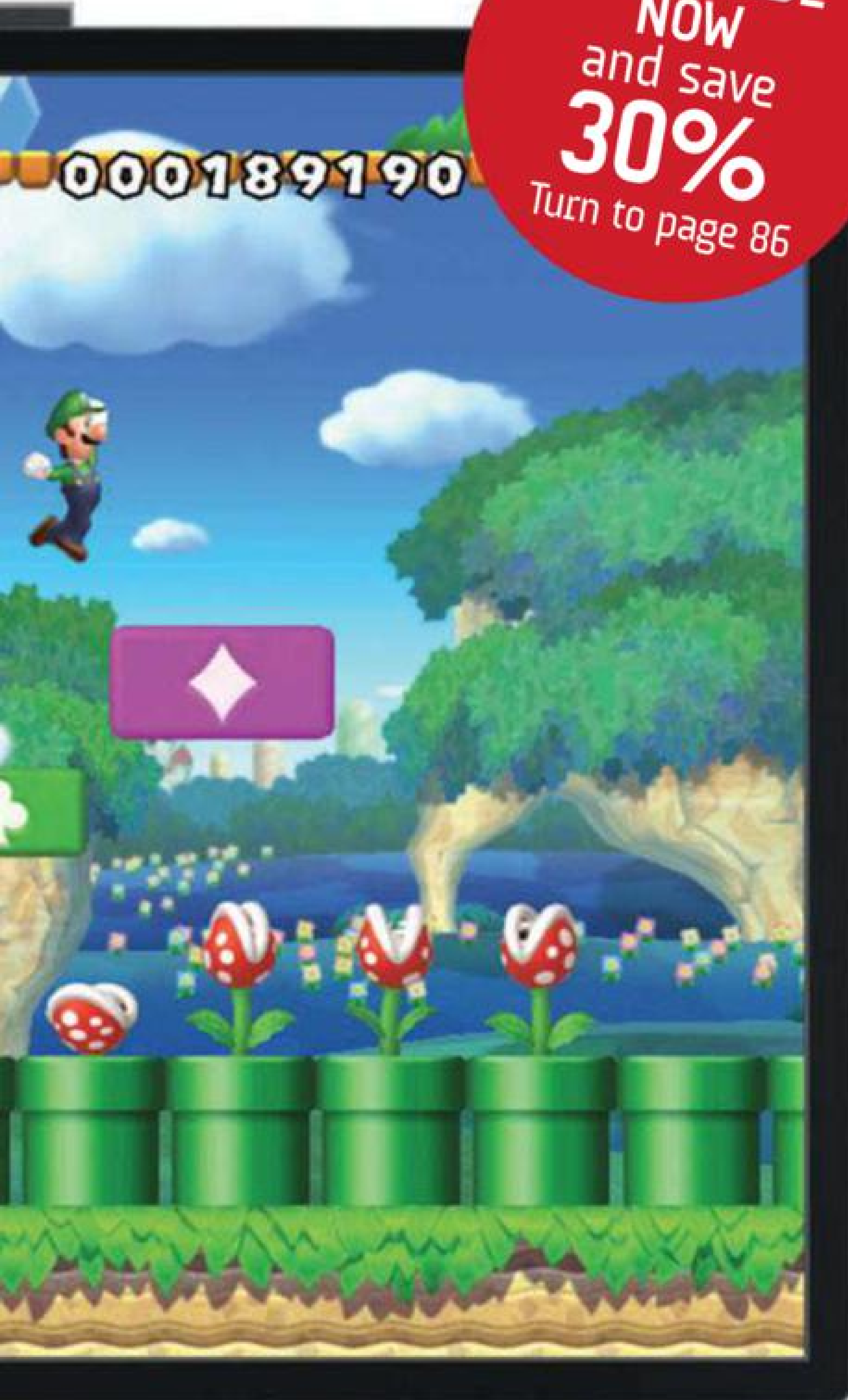
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Wii U: The Verdict

Nintendo's hardware and games go under the spotlight

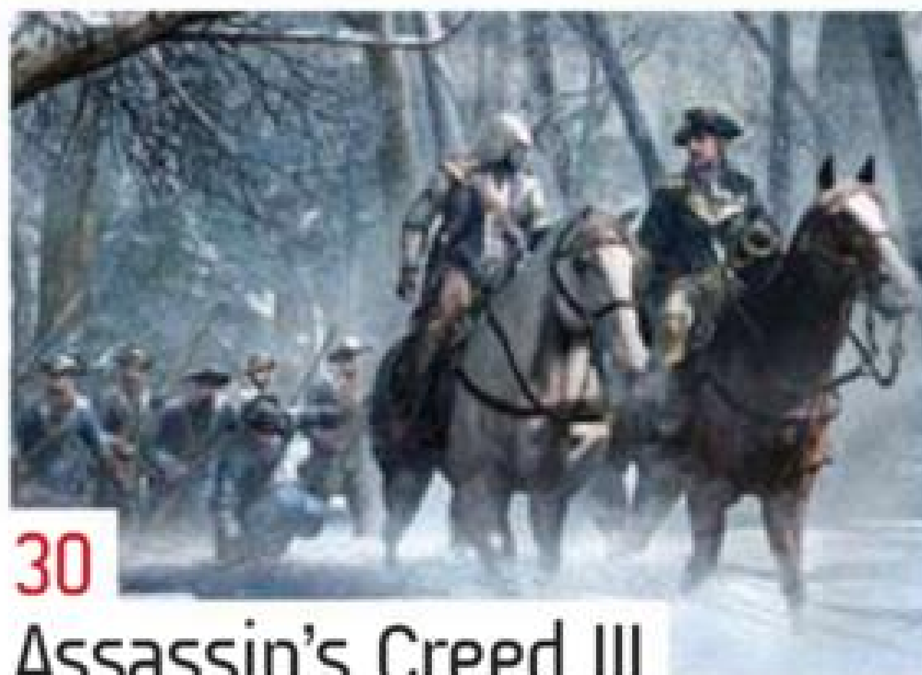


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Has Diablo III doomed PC gamers?

→ As the tremors from Diablo III's rocky launch subside, games™ examines how the fallout from Blizzard's always-online single-player RPG could affect the future of PC DRM

It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to call *Diablo III* the biggest launch in PC gaming history. After a twelve-year absence for the franchise, *Diablo III* shattered the PC game day-one sales record, with the highly anticipated dungeon crawler selling an impressive 3.5 million copies in its first day and usurping the previous record held by *World Of WarCraft: Cataclysm*. But it was arguably a hellish launch day for thousands of gamers unable to actually play due to problems stemming from *Diablo III*'s requirement they be constantly connected to Blizzard's Battle.net servers – even when playing its single-player game. As Blizzard's servers were filled beyond their capacity to cope, thousands of angry players faced constant error messages and were quick to vent their fury online. While Blizzard has always maintained it tied *Diablo III* to Battle.net – with characters, accounts and gameplay elements all house server-side – in order protect features like multiplayer and its real-money in-game auction house from abuse, many saw it as simply draconian DRM preventing them from enjoying the game they'd bought.

Blizzard is no stranger to huge game launches, having dealt with *World Of WarCraft* and its often-massive expansion packs, and the developer held an open stress test beta just prior to launch, something the legions of fans that review-bombed the game on Metacritic claimed should have left it prepared. The outcry prompted Blizzard President Mike Morhaime to respond in a statement apologising for the widespread server issues, saying, "We greatly appreciate everyone's support, and we want to sincerely apologise for the difficulties many of you encountered on day one.

"Despite very aggressive projections, our preparations for the launch of the game did not go far enough." With outstanding issues over lag and an increase in account hacking, Blizzard also quickly moved the date for the implementation of *Diablo III* real-money

DATA STREAM → RESEARCH FIRM DFC INTELLIGENCE PREDICTS INDUSTRY REVENUE WILL HIT $70 BILLION BY 2017



> "I personally don't have a problem with being online to play a game if it doesn't inconvenience customers"
>
> Brad Wardell, Stardock Corporation



Above The industry has managed to make DRM itself something of a poisoned phrase, perhaps partly explaining the fan backlash over *Diablo III*.

in-game auction house to an unspecified date in the future.

Diablo III's launch problems raise several questions about whether the industry is really ready for constantly online DRM, and whether we could be greeted by a wave of intrusive online DRM in its wake. "I personally don't have a problem with being online to play a game if it doesn't inconvenience customers," says Brad Wardell, CEO of Stardock Corporation, the publisher behind PC franchises such as *Sins Of A Solar Empire* and a long-time advocate of DRM-free PC games. He believes if DRM has to be used it should be consumer-serving and invisible to them, but the current online infrastructure isn't yet good enough to support a constantly online connection. "Unfortunately, I think we're still a bit early in this process to do this sort of thing. I don't think it's a good idea in 2012. Maybe someday, but not today."

THE IDEA THAT any DRM should be as non-invasive as possible is a sentiment shared by Graeme Struthers from Devolver Digital, an independent publisher behind a number of PC developers including Creoteam, the creators of the *Serious Sam* series. "People who buy games shouldn't suffer from intrusive DRM systems that make the whole experience unpleasant," says Struthers. While *Diablo III* certainly failed to meet that criteria, Struthers points out drama when launching a game with an online infrastructure isn't anything new; when *Half-Life 2* launched and was tied to Steam back in 2005, gamers experienced similar problems trying to access their content. "I don't think that Valve then or Blizzard now are trying to do anything that's harmful to the customer," he says, "I think they're just having that wonderful problem of having a huge demand, and their system's at the point they went live just couldn't handle that demand. But you trust them to sort it out and solve it, and with Steam Valve has certainly done that. So I think games developers don't sit here thinking of ways to screw the customer; we try and think up ways to sell things to the customer."

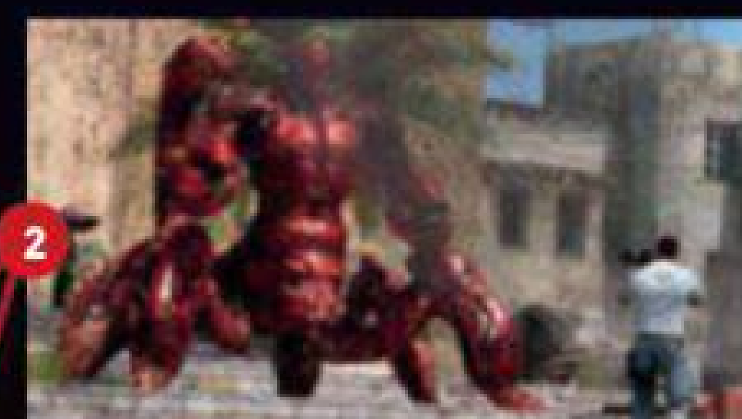
But *Diablo III* has once again shown why gamers often feel like they're in a tug of war with the industry over DRM, with some resentful at the idea of having to be constantly online to play a single-player game. It arguably highlights the business-driven DRM aspect of the situation rather than any of *Diablo III*'s gameplay benefits. But many of the problems around DRM often stem from a divide between the business and creative side of the industry. "I think a lot of people who make games love games, but when they have to work through the whole corporate ➔

Five Most Devilish Forms Of DRM

➔ While the majority of DRM is boring, there have been some developers that have had imaginative approaches to protecting their content. **games™** takes a look at five of the best…



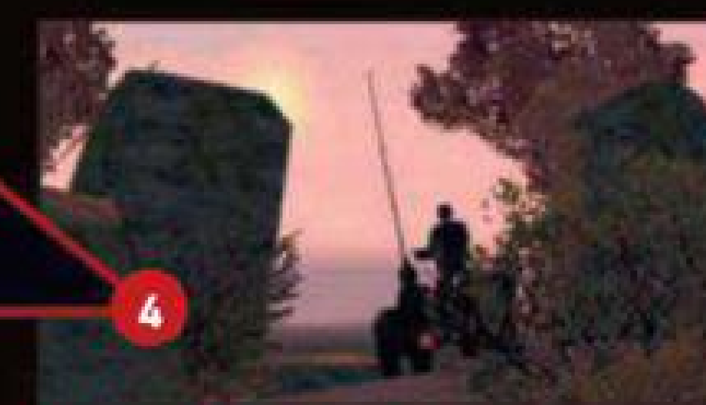
1 Batman: Arkham Asylum
Rocksteady and Eidos created a bug in pirate copies of the game that meant Batman continually leapt to his death trying to cross a chasm in the Asylum.



2 Serious Sam 3 BFE
Serious Sam developer Creoteam created a DRM solution that matched their trademark humour with an invincible giant Scorpion that continually chased players in pirated copies of the game.



3 The Secret Of Monkey Island
Old LucasArts games like *The Secret Of Monkey Island* came with a physical form of copy protection, in the form of a code wheel that had to be used to launch the game.



4 Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis
Cold War Crysis came with a clever form of protection called Fade that could lower weapon accuracy and damage or increase enemy endurance for players with pirated copies of the game.



5 Ultima VII Part 2: Serpent Isle
If players failed to answer copy protection questions, all NPCs spoke only in altered versions of famous quotes, and all items in the world were labelled 'Oink.'

➔ CRYTEK TO BECOME A F2P-ONLY STUDIO AFTER COMPLETING CRYSIS 3, HOMEFRONT 2 AND RYSE ➔





chain, the people making decisions about DRM aren't actually gamers so they don't understand the impact it has upon a gaming experience," says Trevor Longino, head of marketing and PR at GOG.com, which has been committed to DRM-free gaming from its inception. "What I would say is DRM is a symptom of managing by spreadsheet when you're an accountant and you're trying to say, 'How do we do loss minimisation for our game, how do we prevent people from pirating our game?' There are two ways you can do this. One is to say, 'Let's provide excellent content so that we will be fighting pirates with, simply because people will be saying, 'Man, that's a great deal; I *will* be spending my money.' Or you can say, 'That's really hard to quantify; how do I put that into a checklist? Lets just use DRM... there, done.' Much easier." It's this divide, claims Wardell, that's often at the root of the DRM battle between the industry and consumers. "Typically, it creates a problem because publishers are often non-technical and insert crude DRM at the last minute into software that has the effect of damaging sales."

WHILE THE ISSUES that have plagued *Diablo III* in the first few months of launch will no doubt be quickly tackled by Blizzard, its choice to use constantly online DRM and the success of *Diablo III* despite the protests will no doubt have a ripple effect throughout the industry. The huge numbers behind *Diablo III* are a testament to the selling power of big established franchises, despite intrusive DRM, and as industry analyst Michael Pachter wryly points out, "Gamers seem especially tolerant of companies that they love."

It's hard not to imagine other publishers are looking at *Diablo III*'s apparently ironclad DRM and the Battle.net gaming infrastructure with hungry eyes. Which publisher wouldn't want the ability to control just about every aspect of a gaming experience, and have an easy way to deliver content? "I think the idea of having the closest possible relationship with the customer that you can get is an obsession with most content industries," says Struthers. He believes the idea of a persistent connection is a growing trend, and not just in games. "There are plenty of tech companies trying to figure this out; it will become an increasing part of certainly the uber gaming franchises." With that in mind, it's easy to understand why EA set up Origin last year, and it's also easy to envision more publishing companies creating Battle.net-style systems. That combination of security and large user base sends a strong message to the financial world and, according to Struthers, there is the danger that gamers could end up with terrible systems as a result.

> "DRM is a symptom of managing by spreadsheet when you're an accountant and you're trying to say, 'How do we do loss minimisation for our game?'"
>
> Trevor Longino, GOG.com

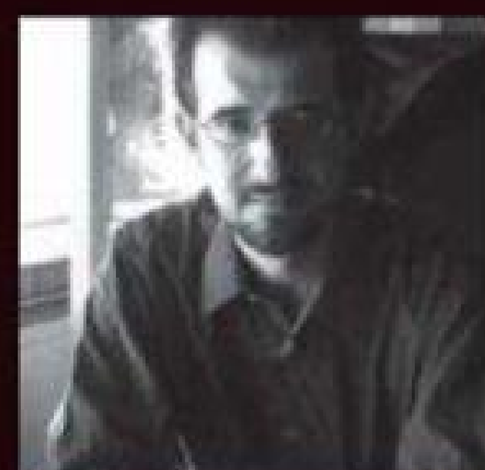
BUT THERE'S ANOTHER potential hidden cost in this form of DRM. While Blizzard has proven willing to support old games in the long term – you can still play the original *StarCraft* – not every publisher will be able to afford or want to be quite as benevolent. EA, for example, has a reputation for ruthlessly closing game servers, which according to Longino could see some constantly online games lost to the mists of history. "I would say one of the downsides that is going to be really bad for games that have an always online requirement is that unless at some future date the person who made that game removes that constantly online requirement you won't be able to have a service like GOG selling that game. So when you lose that online connection," explains Longino, "you lose a chunk of gaming history."

GOG.com, he says, is dedicated to promoting gaming culture by making as many of the industry's historically important games as possible available to gamers in the future, but that might not be possible if this kind of digital rights infrastructure becomes the norm. "In ten years, will the GOG of 2020 have a hard time trying to release games from 2012 simply because so many of them have an integral built-in DRM in their structure?" he asks. "That would be a shame, I think."

While there might be an air of inevitability around the concept of constantly connected infrastructure, especially given the potential profits to be made, there are alternatives. Many developers, feeling that traditional



Brad Wardell, Stardock Corporation



Trevor Longino, GOG.com



Graeme Struthers, Devolver Digital



Above Many developers believe that any form of DRM can have an adverse effect on games sales, and some believe it actually attracts piracy.



Above Some developers fear that if constantly online systems are adopted then abandoned future gaming classics could be lost forever.

KOREAN MMO GIANT NEXON ACQUIRES A 14.7% STAKE IN GUILD WARS 2 PUBLISHER NCSOFT FOR $688 MILLION

Below The industry has managed to make DRM itself something of a poisoned phrase, perhaps partly explaining the fan backlash over *Diablo III*.



DRM ultimately hurts sales, are choosing to use them. "I don't think it has to be a closed system," claims Wardell. "I do think you will see customers being asked to type in their user ID and password eventually. There are a lot of really great things we can provide customers if we know that only customers are getting it. But, like I said before, I don't think we're there yet. There are lots of people who don't have that kind of access to the internet."

For his part, Longino believes there is a better approach to anti-piracy, and it's one that GOG.com fully embraces; a combination of ensuring gamers feel they're getting good value for money, including extras that pirated copies don't grant, and building strong community links with your customers. "When you know somebody, you're less prone to do something that you feel will hurt them. So by establishing close bonds with the community we established an effective anti-piracy measure that doesn't involve controlling your computer, but involves having you think of us as good guys, 'cause we are, and you feel like you should do right by us 'cause we do right by you."

It's the sort of sentiment that many will instinctively warm to, but it's hard to argue with *Diablo III*'s huge sales figures. Some gamers might claim *Diablo III* has potentially opened the gates to a DRM hell, but it'll be up to them as consumers to decide with their wallets just how wide those gates will open.



Hell hath no Fury

→ We ask **games™** readers their opinion on Diablo III's DRM

Did *Diablo III*'s constantly online DRM influence your decision to buy the game or not?



Didn't bother me. I wanted to play *Diablo III* after all the hype and the 11-year wait. I really didn't care less about the constantly-online DRM. I'm always on the internet anyway, so it wasn't an issue for me personally. I can see how people without internet connections could be annoyed though, as you can't play the game without an internet connection.
Blakey

Not bothered - but it would bother me if it became the requirement for single-player games in general. Is cheating really that endemic in PC gaming that it forces a company to prevent it this way?
Merman

It doesn't really affect me since I don't really play all that many PC games, but I do see how it could become a problem. What happens if ten years down the line the servers are shut or – unlikely, I know – Blizzard shuts down? You'd be left with a particularly shiny coaster (unless you downloaded it, in which case you'd have even less).
Rotek

I think it's bollocks personally. If I were to play it on my laptop, I'd have to use an Ethernet connection; my wireless connection drops at a whim. This would in turn mean that I either sit in my hallway playing it, or trail seven or eight meters of cable through to the lounge.
Guinnes1981

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→ THQ ADMITS THE NEXT UFC UNDISPUTED WAS IN DEVELOPMENT BEFORE THE RIGHTS WERE SOLD TO EA →

(THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS)

Microsoft tackles the competition

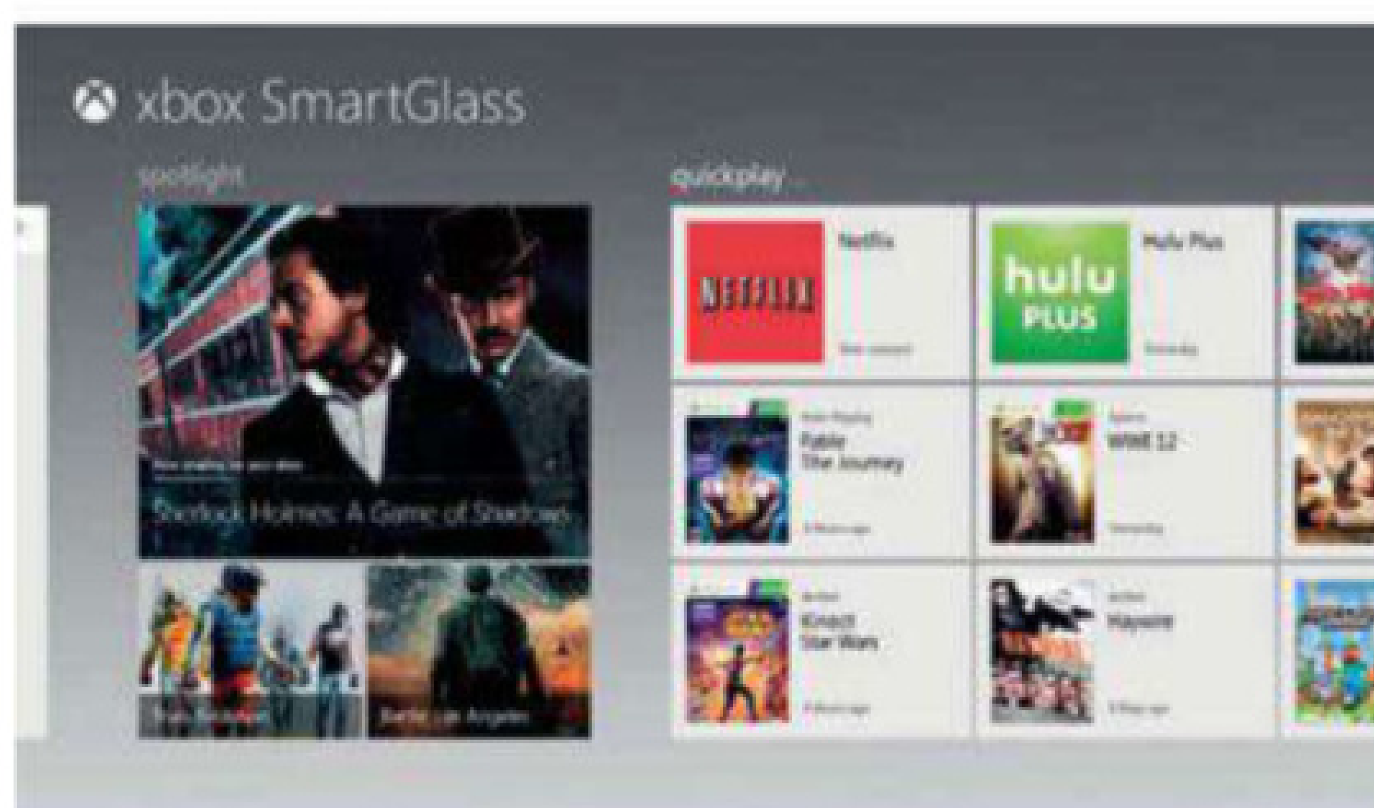
→ With Microsoft's introduction of SmartGlass, **games™** examines its potential and asks if it could be a Wii U killer

There can be few things more exciting, or profitable, than getting the drop on the competition in the games industry. At E3 Microsoft arguably did that to Nintendo and the Wii U with the introduction of SmartGlass, an application that enables smartphones and tablets to directly interact with the 360 – part of a growing trend. "People are second-screening [with smartphones and tablets] in their homes," explained Microsoft's Peter Orullian, speaking to venturebeat.com. "They're getting them for direct TV providers; they're getting them for social networks; they're getting them for game consoles."

Naturally, gamers are excited about SmartGlass, and see it as response to Nintendo's Wii U, but Microsoft is also future-proofing itself against the Apple threat. "It's a recognition by Microsoft that Apple is here, and it is definitely taking gaming seriously," said Peter Molyneux speaking on a BAFTA industry expert panel to GamesIndustry.biz. According to Molyneux, the industry has stopped innovating with connectivity. "And there are plenty of holes that smart people like Apple will offer to fill more easily, more delightfully, with more accessible games."

Below SmartGlass will act like a media app, providing info such as a story synopsis, character stats and even recommendations on TV and movies. Nintendo, by contrast, hasn't revealed the Wii U's media abilities.

That said, Microsoft has showcased some interesting SmartGlass applications: in action game Ascend: New Gods it displays monster stats and maps, while games like Dance Central 4 and Madden NFL use mobile devices as song selectors or to map out plays. But that's only the tip of the iceberg. "I think the most exciting thing about SmartGlass," Robert Bowling, president of Robotoki told venturebeat.com, "is that developers can use this extra screen to offer extra buttons and input options to players that the regular controller doesn't have." Upcoming XBLA game Home Run Stars enables players to use SmartGlass to pitch in conjunction with Kinect. Many of these possibilities were presented by Nintendo as unique to Wii U, and it's tempting to suggest the loss of its unique selling point could certainly hit the Wii U hard.



BUT SMARTGLASS might not be the advantage it first appears. Despite their proliferation, not everyone will want to use mobile devices for gaming. Just as with Kinect, too much SmartGlass-dependent functionality in games could actually see it becoming a barrier. But Molyneux claims there's a greater danger. "One overriding thing that is true of all hardware, but doubly true of Smart Glass," he explained, "is that it needs applications that really delightfully support it. And that's where I was disappointed in the Wii U."

"I struggle, as a designer," he added, " to think of how we'll use this second screen." There's arguably an air of gimmickry to Microsoft and Nintendo's offerings, and unlikely 'second screening' will have the impact of motion control. While the impact of such a disappointment on Microsoft would be minimal, for Nintendo, however, it would be devastating. Ironically it might not be Microsoft that has gotten the drop on Nintendo – it could be Nintendo itself.

→ SOUTH KOREA TO BAN ALL ONLINE ITEM TRADING AND VIRTUAL HARVESTING IN A BID TO COMBAT 'TEEN CRIME'

Microsoft Surface Rises

→ As Microsoft Surface launches, **games™** looks at what if what it's bringing to the table could really take on Apple's gaming success

Microsoft wasn't likely to leave tablets the sole domain of Apple forever, but its new Microsoft Surface Windows 8-based tablets leave little doubt as to how serious it is about the market. It announced two versions of its hardware; the Surface for Windows 8 Pro sports an impressive Intel Core i5 Ivy Bridge processor and 64 or 128 GB of memory, running on Windows 8. The Surface for Windows RT has a less powerful NVIDIA-made ARM with 32 or 64GB of memory and runs on Metro Apps purchased through the Windows Apps store. Both come with magnetically attached touch keyboards. "It's a tablet that works and plays the way you want to. A tablet that's a great PC. A PC that's a great tablet," said Steve Sinofsky, President of Microsoft's Windows division.

While business users will find Surface attractive due to its increased power and top-end versions of Microsoft products, it also has great gaming potential. Because it's essentially a high-end PC in tablet form with a keyboard and trackpad, it does away with a great many of the restrictions and frustrations developers and core gamers often suffer on Apple devices. Not only are more traditional games and gaming types instantly possible, but developers have huge amounts of power for games. It can also fall into the existing PC gaming infrastructure, with services like Steam, Origin and GOG. More importantly, Microsoft will be able to leverage the Xbox brand, and if it continues down the path of connectivity we could eventually see 360 Xbox Live and on Demand games playable on Surface.

But any upset has to overcome market inertia, and Apple has become firmly entrenched. Not only does it have a huge install base, but many of the features and restrictions of iOS have come to define gaming on tablet. With casual gamers having embraced simpler iOS-style apps and gaming, how much attraction is there for them in an uber-powerful tablet? There are questions as to how attractive a comparatively flimsy touchpad will appeal to those gamers who currently play on console or PC. On the developer front it's the high cost of Windows-based development that's driving many to iOS. How many of them are going to want to ramp up development costs to fully utilise Surfaces spec?

But even with all those questions looming, and the price of the system still unannounced, Apple must surely be feeling uneasy about an unexpected Xbox-style coup with itself in the Sony role. Microsoft has pulled it off before, after all.

Living in hope

→ Five Rumours about the Xbox 720 we hope are real

As Microsoft refuses to respond to the recent leak of a 55-page document allegedly from 2010 and outlining its plans for the Xbox 720, games™ looks at five of the features it claims are coming to the next-gen system and how, if true, they would benefit gamers.

1. THE XBOX 720 WILL LAUNCH IN 2013 AND COST $299 – The industry would benefit financially and creatively from the earliest possible arrival of the next generation, and that price tag would ensure wide early adoption of Microsoft's new system.

2. IT WILL SPORT A BLU-RAY DRIVE AND KINECT V2.0 – A Blu-ray drive would give developers the physical medium needed for next-gen games, and Kinect 2's rumoured improved voice recognition and motion tracking for up to four players would finally make it viable for core gaming.

3. XBOX 720 WILL BE SIX TIMES MORE POWERFUL THAN 360. According to the leak, Xbox 720 could be six to eight times as powerful as 360, driven by either six or eight ARM or x86 2GHz cores, with 4GB of memory, and three PowerPC cores for backward compatibility – enough muscle to deliver true next-gen experiences.

4. XBOX TV – The 360 is already an entertainment hub for many gamers, and the rumoured plans to create a video on demand service for the Xbox 720 would only consolidate that role.

5. IT WILL COME WITH VIRTUAL REALITY GOOGLES – According to the documents, Microsoft is joining Google in the hands-free head-mounted display space, with 'virtual reality' glasses codenamed 'Fortaleza', which could allow for new experiences and game types.



→ THE HUMBLE INDIE BUNDLE HAS BROKEN RECORDS WITH 600,000 DOWNLOADS, AND HAS RAISED $5.1 MILLION

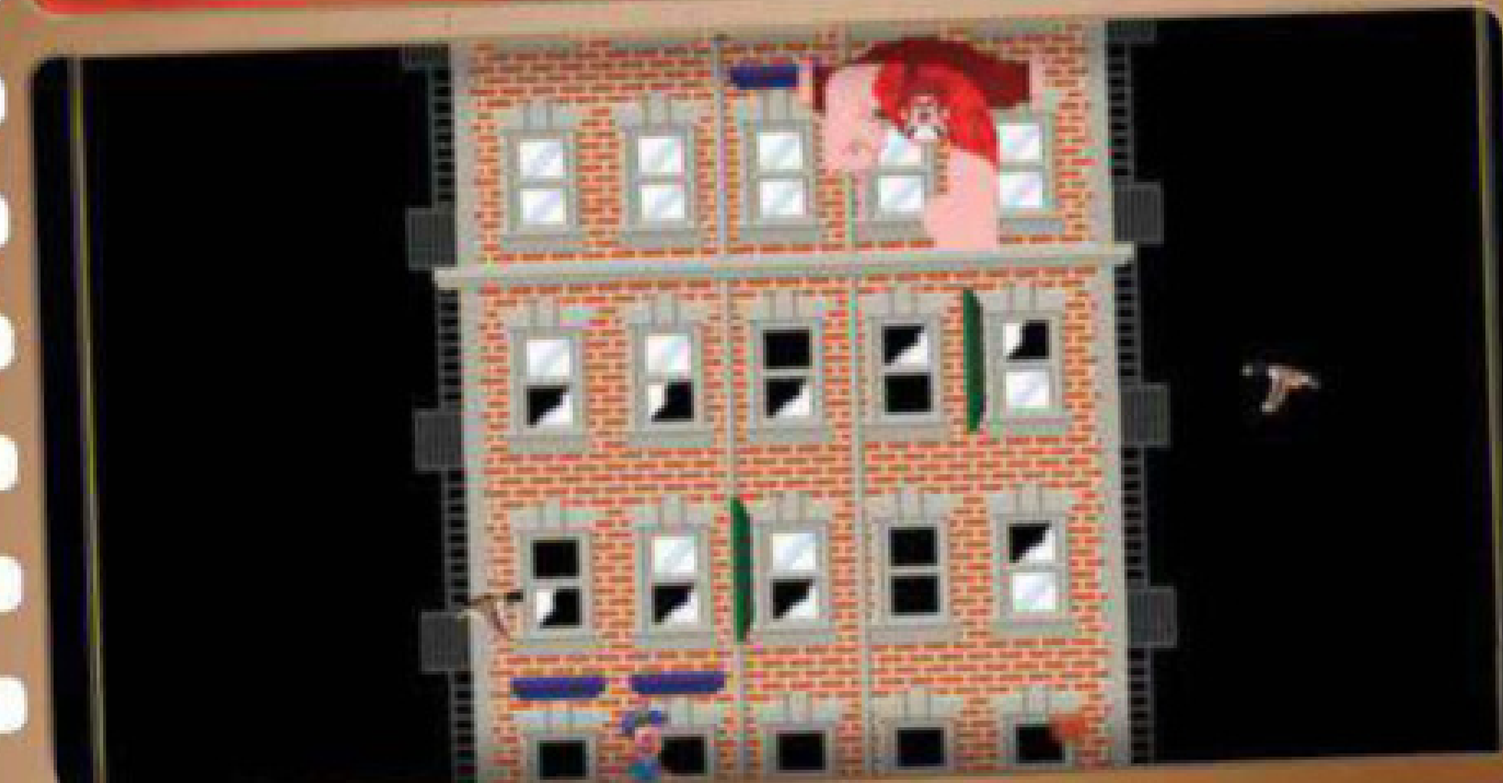












(WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS)

Videogames: THE MOVIE

→ As Walt Disney Animation Studios prepares to pay homage to videogames in the upcoming Wreck-It Ralph movie, **games™** takes a look at just what this silver screen celebration of the medium promises fans

It's a sure sign something has become firmly embedded in popular culture when Hollywood feels secure enough to parody it. It's almost as if a subject reaches a peak in cultural consciousness – and crests in self-referential cinematic expression as the masses have a deep enough understanding of its tropes to appreciate the parody. It happened to cowboy movies in the Seventies with *Blazing Saddles*, sci-fi and *Star Wars* in the Eighties with *Spaceballs*, action movies, horror and even the fantasy genre following the success of *Lord Of The Rings* in the early twenty-first century. So given how the videogame generation has come of age and parody itself has become more nuanced with time – beyond mere ridicule there's now space for nostalgia, self-referential teasing and in-jokes galore, all mainstays of gaming culture – it's hardly surprising that Disney Studios decided to create a film like *Wreck-It Ralph*. The upcoming CGI-animated movie directed by Rich Moore, a former animation director on *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, is a gentle parody and homage to the concept of videogames, all wrapped in the Disney formula of a journey of self-discovery that's worked so well for generations.

Wreck-It Ralph's narrative is as simple as it is endearing: Wreck-It Ralph (voiced by John C. Reilly) is the villain of a *Donkey Kong*-esque videogame who's tired of being unappreciated and constantly losing to the Mario-inspired good guy Fix-It Felix. He longs to prove he's actually a good guy and leaves his arcade machine to explore a series of other games in the Litwak's

> “Like Ralph himself, videogames have evolved from a misunderstood subculture to a beloved institution that everyone can enjoy”

Watch the movie, play the game

■ IT'S HARDLY surprising, but as part of the marketing for the movie Disney has produced a *Wreck-It Ralph* flash game that's a cross between the original *Donkey Kong and Crazy Climber*. It puts players in control of Fix-it Felix Jr, tasked with scaling a red brick building, repairing the damage Ralph above you has done, while avoiding angry ducks and the bricks he drops. You're aided by collecting pies that grateful residents have left on windowsills, and when you reach the top they band together to throw Ralph off the roof. It's all very simple, but very much in the spirit of the movie's premise.

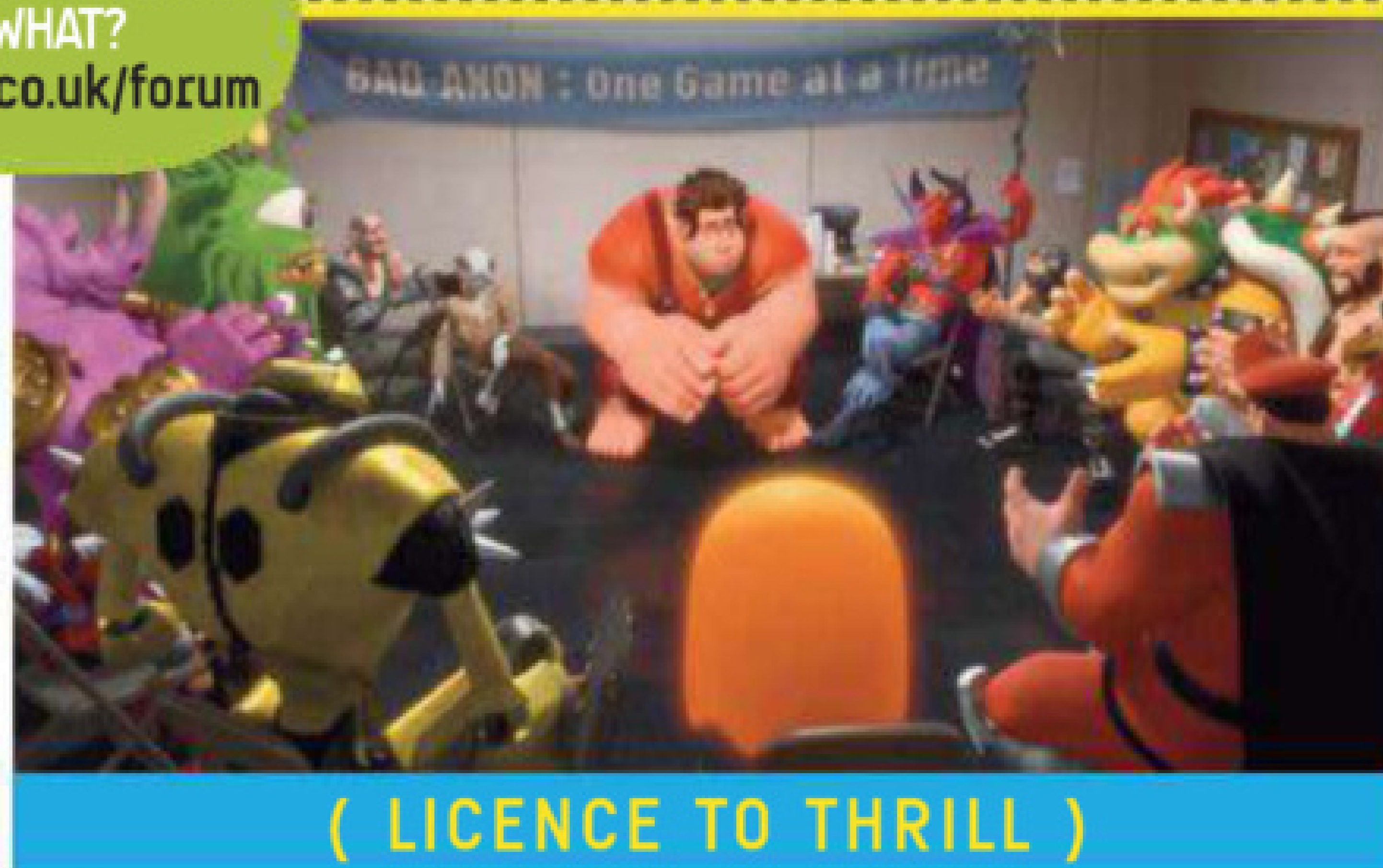
→ DIABLO III'S REAL-MONEY AUCTION HOUSE LAUNCHES IN USA

IS WRECK-IT RALPH THE BEST THING EVER OR WHAT?
gamestm.co.uk/forum

Arcade where he lives. In the course of his adventures Ralph will travel through various videogame worlds like Sugar Rush, inspired by *Mario Kart*, and Hero's Duty, a sci-fi parody of *Call Of Duty*, to prove he can be both a hero and a good guy. With Moore no stranger to geek cultural parody with his work on *Futurama*, we expect plenty of clever adult humour woven into *Wreck-It Ralph*'s Disney-style children's morality tale of achieving your true potential.

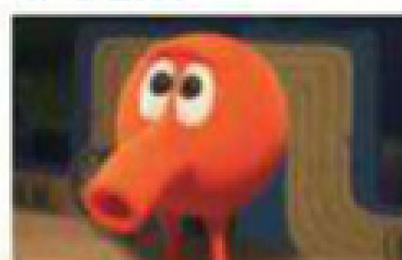
BUT WHAT MAKES *Wreck-It Ralph* so interesting is that, while we've had videogame-inspired movies before, we've never had such a clear tribute to the concept *and* history of videogames before. It'd be easy to label *Wreck-It Ralph* '*Toy Story* for videogames', but despite its similar 'things that come alive behind closed doors' premise, it's potentially more than that. A far closer parallel is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, which celebrated the rich history of American and world cartoon animation with an original tale and characters that resonated with the genre's core tropes – while providing a backdrop for the cameos of numerous beloved classic cartoon characters ranging from Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse to Betty Boop and Felix the Cat. *Wreck-It Ralph* will do the same, only with the pantheon of videogame characters that have become a part of our popular culture over the last thirty years or so.

The movie's trailer has already shown a diverse selection of videogame cameo appearances with iconic characters ranging from Q*Bert and *Pac-Man's* Clyde to *Super Mario*'s Bowser and *Street Fighter II*'s Zangief. While videogame fans will inevitably love the movie's various cameos and gaming in-jokes, *Wreck-It Ralph* will mark more than just the first time they've been given such a high-quality homage to the hobby they love – far more noteworthy will be the fact that cinemas around the world will be filled with people who may not consider themselves gamers, but will still have enough of an understanding of videogames to appreciate and recognise the references. It's easy to take it for granted, but *Wreck-It Ralph* just underscores the wider acceptance the medium has gained in the last decade or so. Like Ralph himself, videogames have evolved from a misunderstood subculture to a beloved institution that everyone can enjoy – and it's hard to think of anything more Disney than that.

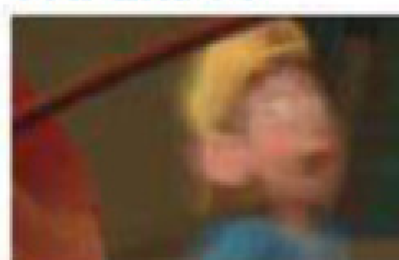


(LICENCE TO THRILL)

Wreck-It Ralph will be led by a cast of characters inspired by videogame greats, but will feature cameos from a diverse range of iconic videogame characters. These are the characters we know about thus far...

Q*BERT


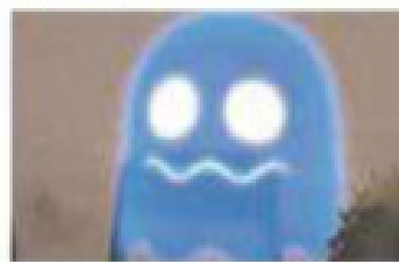
Classic character Q*Bert appears with Fix-It Felix hilariously speaking to him in 'Q*Bertese' in order to find Ralph. Its the sort of in-joke that would be unheard of a few years ago.

PAPERBOY


In a flash so quick most will have missed it, Paperboy appears in the trailer. It's the kind of brief cameo that we can expect for a great many videogame characters that'll make the world feel genuine.

DR WILEY


Mega Man villain Dr Wiley was originally in the support group for videogame villains scene, but has mysteriously disappeared. Perhaps Capcom was unhappy with how he was portrayed?

CLYDE


Clyde the orange ghost from *Pac-Man* appears in the trailer, though unlike the version of the character in the Eighties cartoon, he doesn't appear to have a voice – so a self-help group must be unfulfilling.

Bowser
It's surprising Disney managed to get Nintendo, which is notoriously particular about its characters, to include Bowser, but after losing to Mario so many times it's not such a shock Bowser is in a support group.

Dr. Eggman (AKA Dr Robotnik)
Sonic's mustachioed nemesis is yet another familiar 16-bit face we'll love to hate in *Wreck-It Ralph*, though the role he will play is unclear.

M.Bison & Chun Li
Zangief isn't the only *Street Fighter* character we'll see Chun Li,and classic villain M. Bison will also appear as Zangief's chums.

Zangief
According to sources that have seen an extended version of his scene, Zangief himself explains why he's a bad guy in *Wreck-It Ralph*. "When I hit bottom, I was crushing man's skull like sparrow egg between my thighs. I think, why you have to be so bad, Zangief? Why can't you be more like good guy?" the character says. "Then I have moment of clarity... I say, 'Zangief, you are a bad guy, but this does not mean you are *bad guy*.'"



Kano & Smoke
It's surprising to see violent *Mortal Kombat* characters in a Disney movie, but makes sense given how it's charting videogame history; few bad guys more are bad than these two.

Nurf
The Rhino-like Nurf is primarily famous for his line, 'Welcome to your doom' delivered in terrible scratchy audio just before you fight him in *Altered Beast*.

Tron
Disney owns *Tron*, and *Wreck-It Ralph* director Rich Moore has hinted at a walk-on from Tron himself, Bruce Boxleitner.

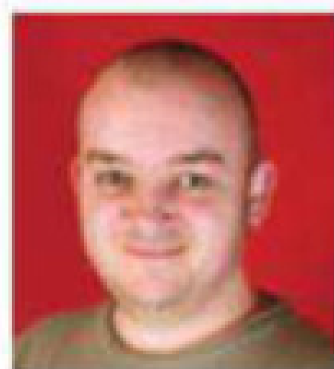
APPLE OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCES IOS 6 AT WWDC 12, EXPECTED TO LAUNCH IN SEPTEMBER THIS YEAR

#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Nick Jones



Nick Jones finds the next generation at E3, not only in Unreal Engine 4, but in another, less obvious, place as well



This year's E3 had a real end-of-generation feel to it. Originality was in short supply: there were lots of sequels to established franchises and none of them showed much in terms of innovation. There was a sense of, 'We've done as much as we can with this generation of hardware, let's move onto the next'.

But if you looked hard enough, the next generation was right there, it was just that no one was really talking about it.

Epic's new Unreal Engine, Square Enix's Luminous Engine, *Star Wars 1313*, *Crysis 3* and, as some would have you believe, Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs*: these were all glimpses of the next-generation of games consoles. No one could deny that both Unreal Engine 4 and the Luminous Engine are impressive as cutting-edge polygon-pushers. On this evidence, things like animation, lighting and real-time destruction are going to take a massive leap forwards in the next hardware generation.

Yet, what these visuals don't show us is how gameplay will change in the next gen, and how the functionality of our new Xboxs or PlayStations (or Steam Boxes) will adapt and evolve in our increasingly connected world. An unlikely source for next-gen functionality was the Wii U. No, not with its decidedly current-generation specifications or its touchpad controller, but in its potentially game-changing online gaming app, Miiverse.

Nintendo's Miiverse hints at the direction that online gaming services like Xbox Live and PSN will take as they seek to incorporate social networking like Twitter and Facebook in meaningful ways. What's clever about Miiverse is that it's as much a part of the Wii U's makeup as Mario or the Game Pad or the silicon that powers the console. As a simple 'Nintendo does Twitter' app, Miiverse would have been uninspiring, but as an intrinsic part of the OS and the games themselves, it has massive potential. Nintendo demoed ways in which the Miiverse could be used: as a simple gaming status update and as a game help system, chiefly, but also, and more interestingly, how Miiverse will work within Wii U's games, and not just as a social networking veneer.

> Mobile phones and tablets have it right: the social network is built-in. It's a lesson that next-gen consoles need to learn and develop

When I think of how this could work, I think of *Demon's Souls*. In From Software's famously hard RPG, players could leave one another simple notes, either aiding on tough sections of the game or in malicious fun and leading them to their doom, with the promise of treasure at the bottom of a fatal drop. The game would also give you hints on how to beat a tough enemy by showing you the final few seconds leading up to a player's death, and players could also 'phase' into other peoples' games, as an opponent or even to take on the role of an end-of-level boss. It was a really innovative use of multiplayer gaming, and ahead of its time, if you ask me. Imagine the potential with a system like this in all games, and on Xbox Live and PSN, or if games were built with social networking in mind, and how that might change games design for the better.

There are already signs that developers are starting to think about how multiplayer gaming needn't be just about competitive or even cooperative play. Jenova Chen's *Journey* enables another player to drop into your game world completely unannounced. It showed how a shared experience, even with an anonymous traveller, could change an otherwise lonesome single-player experience into something with more meaning.

I was really disappointed to find that my PS Vita could take screen grabs but that I couldn't share them via the game (or the OS) on Twitter or Facebook. Mobile phones and tablets have it right: the social network is built-in. it's a lesson that next-gen consoles need to learn and develop.

Super-high-fidelity visuals are a must for the next generation and should really be taken as read. But gorgeous graphics without inspiration and innovation will just lead to another five years of samey shooting games and really good-looking sports games: fun for a while, but ultimately boring. Real innovation, for me, will come from tapping into the social networking revolution and figuring out how bringing gamers together in ways other than for a virtual game of army can make games socially interactive, not just socially combative. And in that, with its Miiverse, Nintendo has a clear head start over its rivals.

Nick Jones is Editor in Chief of NOWGamer.com

CYBERPUNK

→ As *Witcher 2* developer CD Projekt Red reveals its mature role-playing game based on the classic pen-and-paper game *Cyberpunk*, games™ readers share their expectations for a 'real' cyberpunk RPG

■ I want to see it retaining that cyberpunk feel without having to resort to plagiarising the likes of *Blade Runner*/*Cyber City Oedo 808*/*Snatcher* or other anime that I can't think of right now. I wouldn't mind them acknowledging these in the game, just don't steal their ideas and try to pass it as your own....
Brendan McGuigan, Facebook

■ "Can I have a proper pen-and-paper RPG conversion, something like *Baldur's Gate 1* & *2*, rather than an action- orientated FPS with tacked-on RPG elements? Sadly, I suspect it might end up along the lines of the recent *Deus Ex* and *Syndicate* games."
Shinymcshine, *games™* forum

■ "As I was quite impressed at how *Human Revolution* turned out, it won't need to be too different from that template as far as I'm concerned. A third-person perspective would, of course, give the player more options as far as combat and stealth are concerned, and a more lively world would help make the game feel more believable. Apart from that, I guess the only thing needed to beat Eidos' title are interesting characters. I don't want to play a gruff Keanu Reeves."
Joel Hartmann, Facebook

■ "If it isn't a reboot of the classic Amiga game I'm not interested."
Andrew Joseph, Facebook

BIT BY BIT

with Howard Scott Warshaw



Getting in a meta-pickle over art imitating life imitating art



Art. In the beginning there is creation. This inspires commentary. This can lead to the desire for perfection, which leads us to Woody Allen: "The reason we try so hard to make art perfect is because it's really hard to do in life." We know this from one major component of commentary, dissent. Perfection for some reason inspires dissent. Who doesn't love tearing down the icons? Felling the giants? For many it's a hobby; for some it's a lifestyle.

We seek perfection when we create. When we fall short there are plenty of people around to point out exactly how short we are. I learned this from doing *E.T.* Actually, I knew this before I did *E.T.* but I did *E.T.* anyway. Why? Because I'm a bold guy and creation is a bold act. It's easy to hang around waiting for others to create and let their work become fodder for our criticism. But to stand up and create the fodder, that is bold acting.

And speaking of bold acting, there has been speculation the Angry Video Game Nerd is making a movie. Some of that speculation has taken place right in this very column. The AVGN movie is another bold act! In point of fact, the speculation may be put to rest as the AVGN movie is being shot right now. It is happening! Now that is a bold act! I'm eagerly awaiting this movie, not only to join the commentary about it but also because I'm in it! I'm tickled by the prospect of becoming the fodder for my own commentary and potential dissent.

> The Nerd is commenting on my game, and I, the creator of the creation that serves as the subject of his creation, will actually be a part of his creation

I find it interesting how this movie is a creation based on a creation. Isn't this a form of commentary? The Nerd is commenting on my game, and I, the creator of the creation that serves as the subject of his creation, will actually be a part of his creation – which closes the loop in a delightfully self-referential way. With one caveat: the closing of this loop leads to rather an odd loophole, one worthy of comment.

Amidst this circularity lies the inescapable observation that the Nerd's creation not only comments on my creation but also cleverly redefines it. Now I find myself in the precarious position of validating his redefinition of my creation by appearing in it, but what are the implications for me? Extreme care is indicated as I could wind up redefining myself!?

And for yet another trip 'round the möbius strip, consider how my appearing in his creation (which is itself a commentary on my creation) actually constitutes commentary on my part about his creation. And isn't one likely aspect of that commentary a near total lack of dissent in my commentary on his creation. After all, if I had a dissenting opinion about his commentary on my creation I very likely wouldn't bring comment to it by being party to his creation, now would I? Or wouldn't I?

Conceptually this is a very complicated endeavour. How can one creation generate so many headaches? It's only a movie – a movie commenting on the circumstances surrounding a notorious videogame, but only a movie nonetheless. Which takes us right back to Woody Allen, whose movies are rife with commentary, even about some of his other movies. The Woodman takes on Russian literature, relationships, intellectuality, classics, the future and even the artist's self concept. So by way of resolving this labyrinthine conundrum I ask myself the relevant variant of an age old compass of wisdom: WWWD? What Would Woody Do?

This of course is mere rhetoric, since anyone familiar with the American auteur knows that Woody never does anything; he simply talks and talks and talks until he ultimately immobilises himself for our amusement. So who better to ask in this case? I do, however, believe I know what Woody Allen would say – in fact, he already said it in *Annie Hall* (1977): "Oh really? I heard that Commentary and Dissent had merged and formed Dysentery."

And with that, I gotta run!

Howard Scott Warshaw is a videogames development veteran. He allegedly killed the games industry with *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*. We're sure he's sorry.

FINALLY FANTASTIC

→ Square Enix reveal its vision for the next generation

In a stunning video titled Agni's Philosophy Final Fantasy Realtime Tech Demo, Square Enix has revealed its visual standards for the next generation of console games. The incredible demonstration video features real-time visuals so far in advance of current standards that they appear indistinguishable from high-quality CG animation, but perhaps more interesting is the subject matter of the video. Blending a contemporary Third World War setting with high fantasy dragons and magic, Agni's Philosphy is a vision of a *Final Fantasy* that is much more relatable and interesting than anything the series has delivered in recent years. Furthermore, Square Enix CEO Yoichi Wada has revealed that Luminous Studio, the new engine used to create the demo, is built specifically to create RPGs, with room for heavy action elements, adding yet more credence to rumours that *Final Fantasy XV* will do away with menu-based battles once and for all.

The full Agni's Philosophy video can be viewed at agnisphilosophy.com

Unique
Unbelievable
Unproven
Underestimated?



Investing in social interactions – both in the living room and through new online network Miiverse – Nintendo's Wii U may well live up to its 'we' name more so than even its extremely successful predecessor. But is that same level of success assured? **games™** investigates Nintendo's most uncertain hardware launch yet



When Nintendo finally unveiled the firm details of the Wii U, a system it first announced a year ago and then left to flounder in a move that most certainly impacted on the sales of the current machine, it felt as if the Japanese company had embarked on a voyage into the unknown that conjured more questions than it would answer.

It's been known for a while that Nintendo has a problem – one which has seen it post a record loss of $534.6 million for the 2011-12 fiscal year – but those issues go far beyond the financial. The heads that turned when the Wii was released at the tail-end of 2006 have since looked the other way. While the bundled *Wii Sports* got people off the sofa and persuaded those who would never have classified themselves as a gamer to venture into a shop and buy a console, many of those machines have since been gathering dust.

For many, the Wii was their first gaming machine. For others, it will have been the first they owned or played since childhood. Hardcore gamers may have derided the machine for offering too many casual games, but there is no denying that the Wii opened up a fresh entertainment pastime for millions of people, selling close to 100 million units in the six years after launch. Yet too many of those who bought a Wii did not bother getting many more games. They had their Wii parties and the fad passed. *Wii Sports* was played to death and abandoned.

Strange then, that in unveiling the Wii U, Nintendo failed to showcase a single game out of the 23 highlighted that provided anything close to a killer touch. *Nintendo Land* is something people have to play to understand fully, but it doesn't look engaging enough to pick up in the first place. There were intriguing titles such as *New Super Mario Bros. U*, which showed off social networking capabilities, and others such as *Mass Effect 3* that looked magnificent, but there was no information on just how the latter would make a massive difference over the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions, and so the moment was rather lost.

Nintendo's problem is clear: it has to revitalise interest among three groups: the non-gamers who became gamers and then slipped back to non-gaming, those who became fascinated by the broader scope of the Wii's titles and, the most difficult to please of all, the hardcore, many of whom have already jumped ship to Xbox or PlayStation.

The Wii U is supposed to be Nintendo's HD answer, finally catching up with the Xbox 360 and PS3 in terms of power, and bringing a brand new controller to the table. The most obvious thing about it is that the GamePad has a screen, and that does open up many possibilities – even though it appeared that the majority of the first wave of games are not using it in the most innovative way. So many of the games which were on show seem to fall back on the same use – a map and a weapons selection screen – which will certainly make gaming more fluid on the Wii (say goodbye to back-and-forth flipping between game and back-end screens) but is perhaps, in itself, not worth the trade-off of holding such a huge controller pad while you play.

And it is not the only innovative concept on the table either. What the Wii is up against is a swift move by Microsoft to gatecrash the party with its SmartGlass technology, which allows an Xbox 360 gamer to use a smartphone or tablet computer. In turning these devices into a second touch screen display and making use of Windows Phones, iOS and Android, it provides cross-platform compatibility and takes some of the roar out of Nintendo's thunder. Nintendo has to ensure that developers use every inch of their imagination to make the GamePad stand out and it was a massive mistake unveiling last year to give rivals a chance to have a think about ways of hitting back.

In Nintendo's favour, the GamePad and console come as standard right out of the box, so the handheld screen is integral to the whole package. People who buy a Wii will understand the GamePad is part of the playing experience, which may be less obvious to non-core gamers on the Xbox 360, similar to how Sony struggled to gain interest in its PSP-PlayStation 3 tie-ups (and continues to do). Casual gamers in particular will like the standard form of the GamePad and, from a development point of view, this could work rather better than the different sizes of phones and tablets which may still require having to use a GamePad too.



Wii U STATS

Predicted price: £279.99
Predicted release date: Autumn

Technical specs
Size: Approximately 1.8 inches high, 10.5 inches deep and 6.8 inches long.
Weight: Approximately 3.41 pounds (1.5 kg).
Video Output: Supports 1080p, 1080i, 720p, 480p and 480i. Compatible cables include HDMI, Wii D-Terminal, Wii Component Video, Wii RGB, Wii S-Video Stereo AV and Wii AV.
Audio Output: Uses six-channel PCM linear output via HDMI® connector, or analogue output via the AV Multi Out connector.
CPU: IBM Power-based multi-core processor.
GPU: AMD Radeon-based High Definition GPU.
Storage: Internal flash memory. Also supports SD memory cards and external USB storage.
Media: Wii U and Wii optical discs.
Networking Wireless: (IEEE 802.11b/g/n) connection. Has four USB 2.0 connectors supporting Wii LAN Adapters.
Wii U GamePad: 6.2-inch, 16:9 aspect ratio LCD touch screen, traditional button controls and two analog sticks. Inputs include a +Control Pad, L/R sticks, L/R stick buttons, A/B/X/Y buttons, L/R buttons, ZL/ZR buttons, Power button, HOME button, -/SELECT button, +/START button, and TV CONTROL button. Motion control (accelerometer, gyroscope and geomagnetic sensor), front-facing camera, a microphone, stereo speakers, rumble features, sensor bar, stylus and support for Near Field Communication (NFC) functionality. Weighs approximately 1.1 pounds (500 g).
Other Controllers: Supports two Wii U GamePad controllers, up to four Wii Remote (or Wii Remote Plus) controllers or Wii U Pro Controllers, and Wii accessories such as the Nunchuk, Classic Controller and Wii Balance Board.
Predicted launch titles
Nintendo Land, Game & Wario, Pikmin 3, Project P-100, Wii Fit U, Mass Effect 3, Tank! Tank! Tank!, Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge, Darksiders II, Rayman Legends, Batman: Arkham City Armored Edition



Shigeru Miyamoto wants to completely break gaming's over-reliance on a large screen

It would, however, be a mistake to think Nintendo has merely created a controller with a screen and tied it into a next-gen HD console that will sit under the TV. If that were the case it could perhaps be very much underwhelming but, as Shigeru Miyamoto explained when re-unveiling the Wii U at E3 in June, the GamePad is more than just an interactive tool for playing games.

With the new console, Miyamoto says he wants the GamePad to be the focal point of the system and the first thing people see and pick up when they enter the living room. Far from being secondary to the television, he wants to completely break gaming's over-reliance on a large screen by having a system that complements the more open nature of gameplay.

In breaking that firm bond between home console and the television, the Wii U attempts to make great strides towards ever more social gaming. Already, the Wii has made gaming more inclusive than it has ever been, getting people together in the same room and jumping around. It has meant that, while there was much being played out on the screen, more was often happening in the environment surrounding it, and that remains the case: when people get together with a Wii, the focus of attention is as much on the people playing as it is on the TV screen.

Now suddenly here is a system that can be fixed or be portable to some degree. "You can play *Tank! Tank! Tank!* on either the GamePad or TV, or hook up with three other friends," says Namco Bandai Games' brand manager Wyman Jung, for example. Games can be played in the living room with close friends or over a network with distant ones. At the heart of all of this is the Miiverse, a set of built-in social networking features, intended to permeate through every new game created for the system.

The Wii was rather slow on the uptake when it came to online gaming. There was talk of better networking features in 2008, two years after launch, but Sony and Microsoft's social experiences have long been streets ahead of Nintendo's and attempts to better integrate features such as Friend Codes and Wii Speak have hardly been revolutionary. You only have to see the paltry range of games compatible with Wii Speak to see that interest hardly peaked.

The idea of Miiverse is that it enables gamers to talk, video chat, leave messages, hang around, draw and even show their emotional state. The main menu of the Wii U is plastered with icons around which Miis congregate. They are relevant to you: one of them is you; others are your friends and family mixed in with others that you meet from around the world along the way. The games they hang around show what they are playing and it's a bonding experience.

But it seems as if Nintendo still doesn't quite get it. In its bid to appeal to families and be family-friendly, it is going down the step of approving messages (a dangerous move in some respects because it would take liability if unwanted messages ended up appearing, although the company says a community reporting system would scoop those up). Nintendo president Satoru Iwata told the *LA Times* that a computer would initially screen user comments, but that these would then go to moderators for approval. How long will this take? According to Iwata, a staggering 30 minutes, but that would seem to be an outside bet to us, and they would need a lot of motivated moderators if this takes off.

Knowing that you are being monitored and have to adhere to strict guidelines will make the community safer but it will surely be frustrating, taking away the immediacy of gaming. It seems as if Nintendo has always lagged behind when it comes to social media which was very much apparent when, for example, playing *Mario Kart* online on the Wii and yet not being able to hook up socially.

That said, there has not, until Wii U, been a way of sharing high scores or discussing games and aspects of them with others, and the fact that this is coming has to be welcomed. Indeed, the hardware social functions – both online and in the living room – of the Wii U is what makes the system tick, and it is this, rather than the increased graphical power that will ultimately be indicative of the new console's worth.

What is more intriguing is Nintendo's intention for the Miiverse to work differently depending on the game being played. Though it may seem to be little more than an integrated message board, Nintendo producer Takeshi Tezuka claims "that is not what it is." And it's certainly not a standalone forum, for instance, that people have to specifically visit, as Tezuka points out.

"Let's say you are falling down the same pit over and over and over again and dying; the game will actually

The Nintendo Difference?

Wii U's first batch of multiformat games demonstrates a worrying lack of new ideas for the system



Batman Arkham City Armored Edition

Bats is back in an enhanced Wii U version of the second Rocksteady game. And again the GamePad is used to place a real-time map on its screen so that you can get around the nooks and crannies, allowing for greater free roaming. "Another of my favourite things is being able to scan for evidence," says Patrick Emond, lead interface designer at WB Games Montreal. You can physically move the controller to look around.



Mass Effect 3

There's nothing like a spot of hype, but *Mass Effect 3* has been gathering the plaudits despite few details emerging of its Wii U functionality. EA's John Riccitiello says the BioWare title is "the single best piece of software that's been announced for the platform." Expect to see the GamePad screen used for maps, an enemy detection radar and weapon changes, keeping the action flowing on your television and providing the best blast of the game on any platform.

Assassin's Creed III

ACIII uses the GamePad to enable players to navigate around the game's huge open world. The pad becomes a map, but it also lets you select a weapon without going through a series of menus. Alex Hutchinson, creative director of Ubisoft Montreal, says: "It's something that allows you to plan your navigation and see when enemies are nearby."

Just Dance 4

Reggie Fils-Aime was asked to become the puppet master when playing this at the E3 conference, grabbing the GamePad and using it to dictate what four other players using Wii Remotes had to do (standing on one leg being one of the 'moves' he chose). "It's like working at Nintendo," he joked of the mode, but it shows how the GamePad can put a user in greater control of a game.







Aliens: Colonial Marines

Positioned as a sequel to James Cameron's film *Aliens*, *Colonial Marines* uses the Wii U GamePad as a Motion Tracker and lets you use it to scan the environment, enabling you to see the game world in the palm of your hand. "I can literally move around, detecting left and right," swways Randy Pitchford, president and CEO, Gearbox Software. "You hear a noise, look down and you can see where it's coming from."

Darksiders II

Delving into the underworld for a game of exploration, climbing and fighting, you can use the Wii U's controller to look at the inventory and map, which means you can have a seamless experience without interrupting the action on the big screen. "Without that you spend a lot of time going back and forth," says David Adams, general manager, Vigil Games. "It breaks the experience up too much."

Ten Things We Hate About U

There are a few concerns Nintendo needs to address before Wii U can be considered essential

30-Minute approval process

Imagine having to wait 30 minutes before your Tweets appear online. That's the reality facing Miiverse users, at least according to Satoru Iwata. Reggie Fils-Aime has clarified, however, that this approval process applies only in extreme circumstances. Auto-filters should eliminate offensive posts in most cases.

Enough with the maps

The current batch of multiformat games is strong enough, but the way they take advantage of Wii U is not. Many fall back on using the GamePad as a map screen and sprinkle in ideas that do little to convince us that they will be significantly better on Wii U, several months after they've appeared on other systems. Where is the third-party use of Miiverse?

No big FPS

If Wii U is to attract the hardcore crowd then it needs its own big FPS – one that really shows off what a difference the GamePad can make to the genre. ZombiU takes a fair stab at this, but Nintendo really needs its own *Call Of Duty* or, better still, a *Metroid Prime 4*. With Retro Studios' newest title still unannounced, we live in hope that the team has something special lined up.

Where is the killer app?

Wii had *Wii Sports*, Game Boy had *Tetris*. Nintendo 64 had *Super Mario 64*. Nintendo hardware does best when it has a piece of software so well suited to that system's strengths that it becomes synonymous with the console. Does Wii U have that yet? *Nintendo Land* is intended to be that, but we're unconvinced it can sell the system.

An over-reliance on Wii Remotes

So many Wii U games shown at E3 relied on the use of Wii Remotes, that Wii U may prove to be a more expensive console than first thought. *New Super Mario Bros. U* is best enjoyed with four Remotes, plus the GamePad, while Miyamoto's demo of *Pikmin 3* suggested a Wii Remote with MotionPlus add-on would be the definitive way to play the game.



Region Locking

3DS caused a bit of a stir when it became the first Nintendo handheld to region lock its games. With Wii U, Nintendo has the opportunity to break down these barriers. Will it do this? We wouldn't bet on it. With the existence of Miiverse, especially, Nintendo will look to control the experience, ensuring that its casual audience isn't confused by unfamiliar content.

Very little new IP

We'd like to see Nintendo rely less on existing franchises and carving out some fresh IP. We have seen what it can do with hardware and now we would like some bold and daring games that don't include familiar names. Platinum Games' *P-100* is the sort of original but oh-so-Nintendo experience Wii U needs more of.

eShop Support

Nintendo never did get the marketing of WiiWare or the Virtual Console right, and so many of the millions of users barely know it exists and care far less. Better promotion of these services will ensure that low-cost, innovative games will surface in greater numbers for the masses that own Nintendo consoles. A competent digital marketplace is so vital nowadays.

No 1080p in all games

News that many of Wii U's launch titles will only run in 720p resolution casts doubt over the hardware. It's technically capable of outputting 1080p but many games will not. Is this a sign that the hardware isn't much more powerful than Xbox 360, or another case of teams unable or unwilling to maximise their own games?

Quality approval

All consoles have bad games but Wii seems to have had more than its fair share of them, with some devs catering for the lowest common denominator casual crowd. These cheap games put buyers off from further purchases, so Nintendo arguably needs to resurrect its Seal Of Quality from the NES days, preventing publishers from flooding the system with shovelware.

ask you how you feel about this situation," he says. "And if you are falling into that pit time and time and time again, the screen will go dark and you are going to see messages from other people who have had the same experience."

These messages will show up in the game itself. While it is possible to check messages in the Miiverse, it's more about the individuality and difference it makes to each Wii U game. And this connectivity works in other ways too. "I have two daughters and they sometimes ask when they are stuck if I can help them with a certain section," explains Tezuka. "In *New Super Mario Bros. U* we have made it so that anyone can jump in at any time when necessary."

What Nintendo has done with *New Super Mario Bros.* paves the way to inspire a legion of other developers. Friends, family and other players can connect within the game and, as Nintendo of America president Reggie Fils-Aime says, "[They] might be talking about the overall game experience, about specific levels, about hidden areas of difficult jumps and you can probably expect one of your buddies will be bragging about their high score." This real-time social window will open up as you play, he adds, and is at pains to stress that this is all about opening up a new game-based experience.

Fils-Aime chooses those final four words carefully. New. Game-based. Experience. While it can be argued that social networking is nothing new and that much of what was announced is akin to Facebook or Twitter, the point is that Nintendo knows it has a user base installed that enjoys getting together for games of *Wii Sports* or *Mario & Sonic*. It understands that there are people who like to keep fit while using the Wii. It now wants them to engage with Nintendo again, and it is striving towards this goal by extending the reach of the gameplay and ensuring – with the Wii U controller – that people can continue to pick up and familiarise themselves with what is on offer.

The games are the hook around which Nintendo wants people to forge and extend their social lives in much the same way that Facebook has hooked people into a community that is now very difficult to break free from. Iwata spoke of Nintendo Land getting around the problem of one person playing and others watching – "It will bring people together in a more



"It will bring people together in a more deep and meaningful way" - Satoru Iwata

deep and meaningful way" – and, although it is not going to happen straight away, Fils-Aime spoke of the Miiverse being browser-based and therefore extending into everyday life. It will be rolled onto all Nintendo platforms eventually, and will also be available on smartphones, PCs, Macs, tablets, and so on. This is something new for Nintendo, which usually makes its hardware the central point, and means the company is aware of other platforms. For the first time, it puts the user at the centre and provides the content with which they can surround their lives.

But that GamePad could have its problems. As former Microsoft developer Peter Molyneux suggested, people may struggle to figure which screen to look at. Certain people pointed at *Scribblenauts Unlimited* and its power of gluing eyes to the controller to the detriment of the television. Considering most of the action takes place on the GamePad, however, means it's not the most confusing aspect to understand.

Yusuf Mehdi, chief marketing officer for Microsoft's game business, is also sceptical. "When you're playing a quick, real-time twitch game, how much can you look up and down between the screens?" Just like jumping around with a Wii Remote, we fear the GamePad is not really the tool for those hardcore games, or else why did Nintendo bother to produce a screenless controller called the Wii U Pro?

What Wii U also does, however, is force a new way of thinking on developers. The dichotomy of main console and handheld console is suddenly shattered, with the two disciplines being brought ever closer and by having different types of controllers working together on one game, there is also a lot of thinking about how the players interact with a title, the roles they play when working together (or against each other) and the maximising of fun for each of those involved. Such thinking again puts social awareness and the interplay between gamers at the top of the agenda.

A demonstration of new karaoke game *SiNG* showed this. The additional screen allows the main performer to read the words from the GamePad while looking at the other participants, and that person can get the rest involved as they watch what is going on via the television. And yet the point was rather lost. Is the screen really just being used to display a few song lyrics, and is this progress?

Thankfully *SiNG* also showed how the system can work when only one or two people can control a Wii U GamePad and the rest have to use a standard Remote. Nintendo has adopted the buzz phrase 'asymmetric gameplay'. This enables one gamer to exert a greater control of what is happening on screen while the others compete against them. It could involve laying down obstacles for the others to beat or help them to achieve a better route through a game. "With *Just Dance 4*, one person can act as a puppet master," says Ubisoft's Matthew Tompkinson. "Four players can play as usual, but a fifth can pose the moves he wants from other players on the Wii U GamePad."

This is something to be applauded, as it is about opening gaming up and ensuring there is a human element to play. As time goes on, the player will be expected to take more active control of the game and have a direct bearing on other people rather than everything being dictated by the developer. And yet, although most of the games Nintendo has shown are casual, the core gamer seems to be better catered for than ever before.

The Potential Cost Of Wii U*

Although you get a console and GamePad straight out of the box, to fully enjoy your Wii U, you will need a few extras. The Wii U is designed to work with existing peripherals and many games will continue to make use of them, so expect to fork out for a Balance Board, extra Wii Remotes and much more as that toy box gets ever bigger.



*All prices are based on retailer estimates at the time of going to press

Hands-on With Wii U

games™ ranks the nine Wii U exclusives played to date. You may be surprised by our favourites…



Panorama View

9 Though it's listed as a game, we'd be surprised if Panorama View is released as anything more than a free downloadable distraction on Wii U. The demo we played featured four live-action videos, like a ride through London on an open top bus or a hang glider flight with wild geese, and the Wii U GamePad can be used to pan the camera around and look anywhere within the full 360 degrees of the scene. At the end you're presented with the top three sights you looked at, as chosen by the Wii U. Unfortunately, its top pick showed that it caught us staring at a girl on the bus.

Pikmin 3

5 If *Pikmin 3* proves one thing it's that Nintendo should have made the leap to HD years ago. You haven't seen what your TV is capable of until you've played this. Every colour pops from the screen, highlighting that the ever-brown murder simulators of other consoles just aren't getting the most from today's technology. Seeing hundreds of Pikmin on-screen at once is something that takes full advantage of the high-resolution visuals, totally justifying the generation-long wait for this sequel, though it's odd that a Wii Remote and Nunchuk was used to demo the game rather than the GamePad.

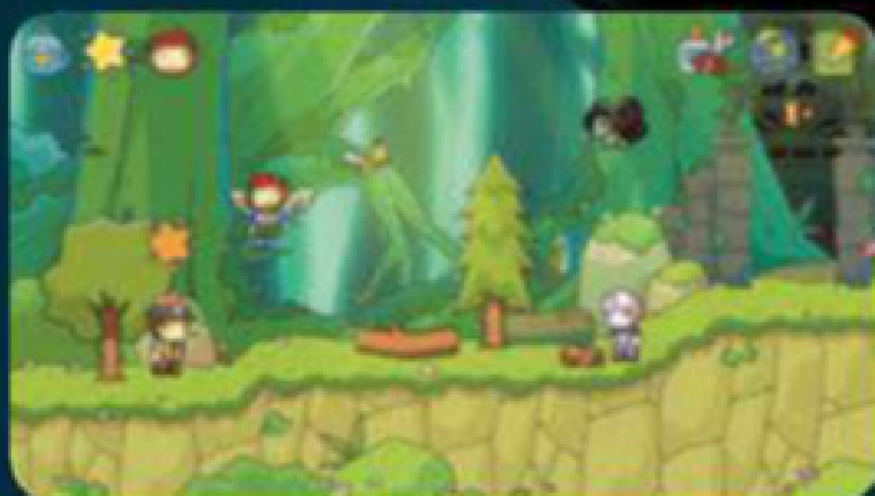
New Super Mario Bros. U

8 There's no denying that *New Super Mario Bros. U* is a fun game. Its flying squirrel suit in particular is a great new dynamic for Mario, combining gliding and parachuting into one power-up. But we can't shake the feeling that this does little to show off what's special about Wii U. There's also an option to use the GamePad so that an extra player can help out by placing platforms and blocks, but even this looks to be nowhere near as well executed as the asynchronous co-op in Ubisoft's *Rayman Legends*.



Scribblenauts Unlimited

7 Playing *Scribblenauts* on a HD screen makes much more of a difference than we could have imagined. Vast play areas host many NPCs to interact with and, as such, the game feels much more like a point-and-click adventure than ever before. Noun and verb usage is more clever than ever and the use of two screens adds a nice informal co-op element as family members gather round and offer advice on potential solutions.



Nintendo Land

6 After hands-on time with four of *Nintendo Land*'s minigames we're convinced that this will be an accomplished party game, but it concerns us that four Wii Remotes, and therefore four extra players, are required to get the most from it. It's also a little concerning that many of the games are old ideas. Luigi's Ghost Mansion is an expanded *Pac-Man Vs*, Zelda: Battle Quest is *Wii Sports Resort*'s Swordplay and Takamaru's Ninja Castle is a reskinned version of a tech demo shown at E3 2011. There are 12 games in the final version, however, so let's hope Nintendo is saving the best for last.



Rayman Legends

4 Though an extremely attractive and accomplished 2D platform game, *Rayman Legends* really shines when played in asynchronous co-op. One player uses a Wii Remote to control Rayman on the TV screen while another lends a hand on the GamePad, using a stylus to grab enemies and hold them down, manipulate platforms to make them traversable and generally make the levels safe for Rayman to run through. It's essentially two games in one, and promotes true conversational co-op between both players.



Game And Wario



3 Nintendo is using *Nintendo Land* to show off what Wii U is capable of, but perhaps this *WarioWare* spin-off would be a better choice. Not only does it make interesting use of the GamePad, but it doesn't need extra Wii Remotes to get other players involved. One minigame we played uses the GamePad to take pictures of criminals in the street, while another player looks at the bigger picture on the TV screen and tells us where the criminals are. It's basically a disguised version of *Silent Scope*, with a friend taking the roll of the spotter, allowing other people to join in without needing to learn how a controller works.





ZombiU

1 Let's just say it. *ZombiU* is currently the best game on Wii U. It's exactly the sort of hardcore, mature game Nintendo needs to make the system relevant to gamers. It's exclusive to the platform. It has some great ideas, and it makes use of the GamePad better than any other game, including anything Nintendo has announced to date. Searching around for loot on the GamePad, while zombies continue to roam toward you on the TV screen, is just the sort of immersive technique only possible on this technology and creates the sort of horror tension previously only seen in movies. It shows, better than anything else, the potential Wii U has to change gaming and it's at the top of our shopping list for the console.

Project P-100



2 Quite why Nintendo didn't show off this new Platinum Games title at E3 is beyond us. It's easily the best Wii U game currently in development in Japan. There's something really addictive about gathering up a huge army of superheroes then morphing them into a composite force such as a giant fist or sword in order to beat up giant enemies. As the game goes on, other abilities unlock, allowing the heroes to form a human ladder or become a giant paper plane, suggesting that there will be lots to learn in the final version of this fun and original action game.

Iwata says, "[The GamePad] uses a motion sensor, an embedded gyro sensor and two geomagnetic sensors to understand which direction you are looking." This could open up all manner of possibilities for sandbox and flight games. But still, what of that traditional Wii U Pro controller, with its looks similar to a Xbox 360 controller? Like the GamePad, it has two clickable analogue thumb sticks as well as shoulder buttons but what does that say about its screen-laden controller? Nintendo appears keen not to alienate the hardcore gamer and, on face value, it looks as if it is aiming for the Wii U to be an inclusive console with all bases covered. Fils-Aime said it would appeal to the hardest of the hardcore and newest of the newbies, but it also smacks of confusion.

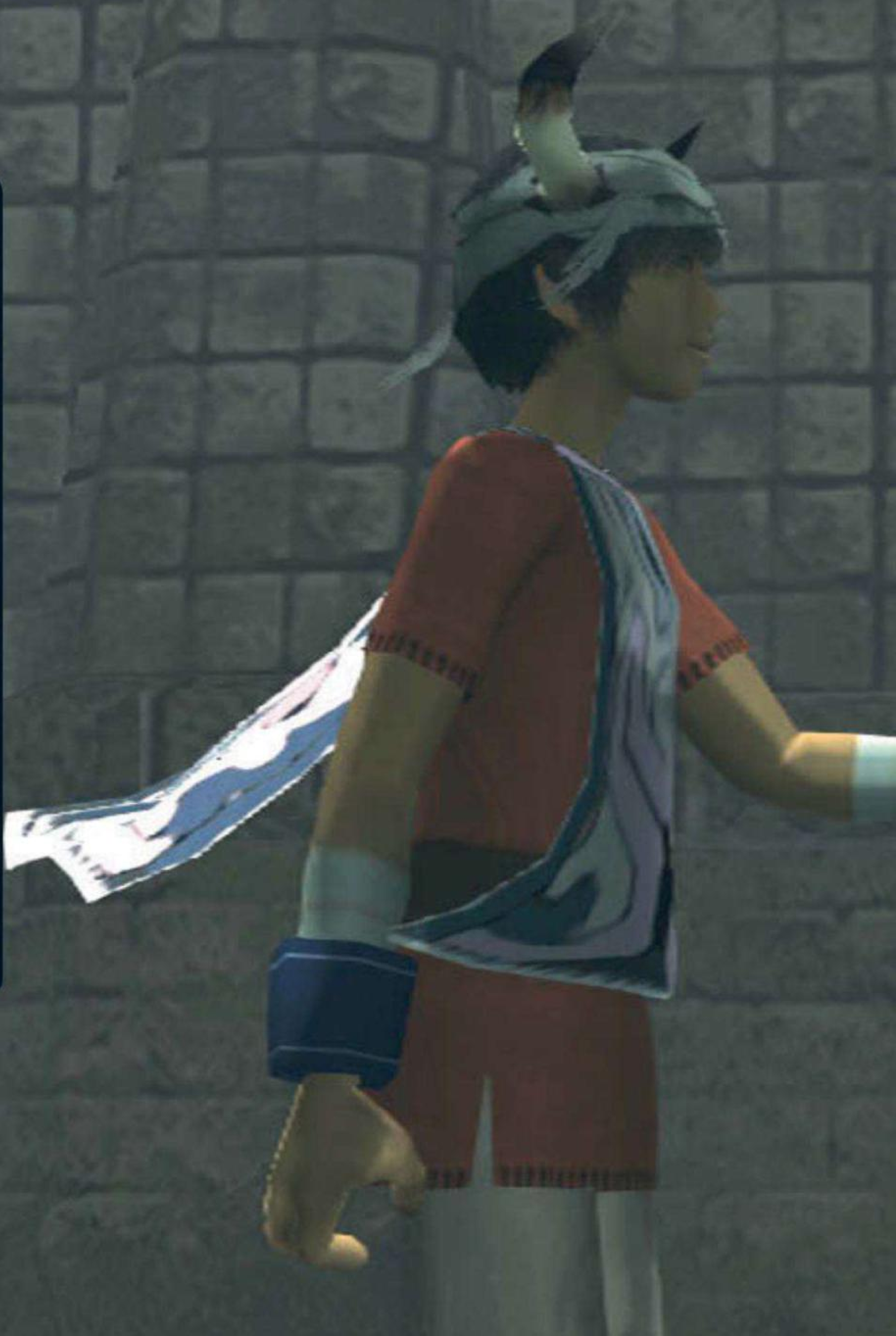
And yet there are still issues. The GamePad has a resistive screen rather than multi-touch, and the console itself – which seems largely forgotten by many because the focus is placed so highly on control – seems to be more of an afterthought because it still lacks technical prowess. Ultimately, we cannot fathom why Nintendo just doesn't go the whole hog and produce that forward-projecting machine that won't look out of date as soon as PS4 and Xbox 720 appear.

Whether or not the hardcore will lap up the Wii U is debatable. Look at *Batman: Arkham City* and see the map placed on the controller and the ability to select the weapons you need from the smaller screen, and they're interesting features. However, the core will have already played the same game already on either PS3 or Xbox 360, and it is highly unlikely they would buy it again just for this feature. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* fares better and uses the GamePad as a motion tracker that can be moved around in front of your face, the motion detection being put to good use, but developers need to try harder if they are to switch the core over.

It does seem at times that Nintendo had a massive list of things everyone wanted from a console. There is a 'kitchen sink' approach to the fact the Wii U GamePad has 'pro' features (those sticks, those shoulder buttons) in combination with the DS-style touch screen, the familiar rumble and the not-so-common near field communication, which lets it scan objects and interact with them when placed on the touch screen. It's also apparent when you consider the GamePad can also be used as a TV remote when the Wii U is switched off, not to mention the backwards compatibility with Wii games. Tick, tick, tick.

But this can be a good thing. The non-gamer uses the GamePad to switch channels and is not scared of touching it. The new player who tried the Wii and loved it starts playing with the thumbsticks and then progresses to 'harder', more traditional games. The person who is adept at using a touch screen on a smartphone takes an interest in what this new pad has to offer. And the hardcore just pick up and play as they have always done, but with the benefits of that second screen. Given that Wii U owners are encouraged to play together and hook their experiences around games, they will learn from each other and gaming will be a far less mystical world for it. That is what the Wii U is all about. It's in the name.





WHY I ♥...

Ico

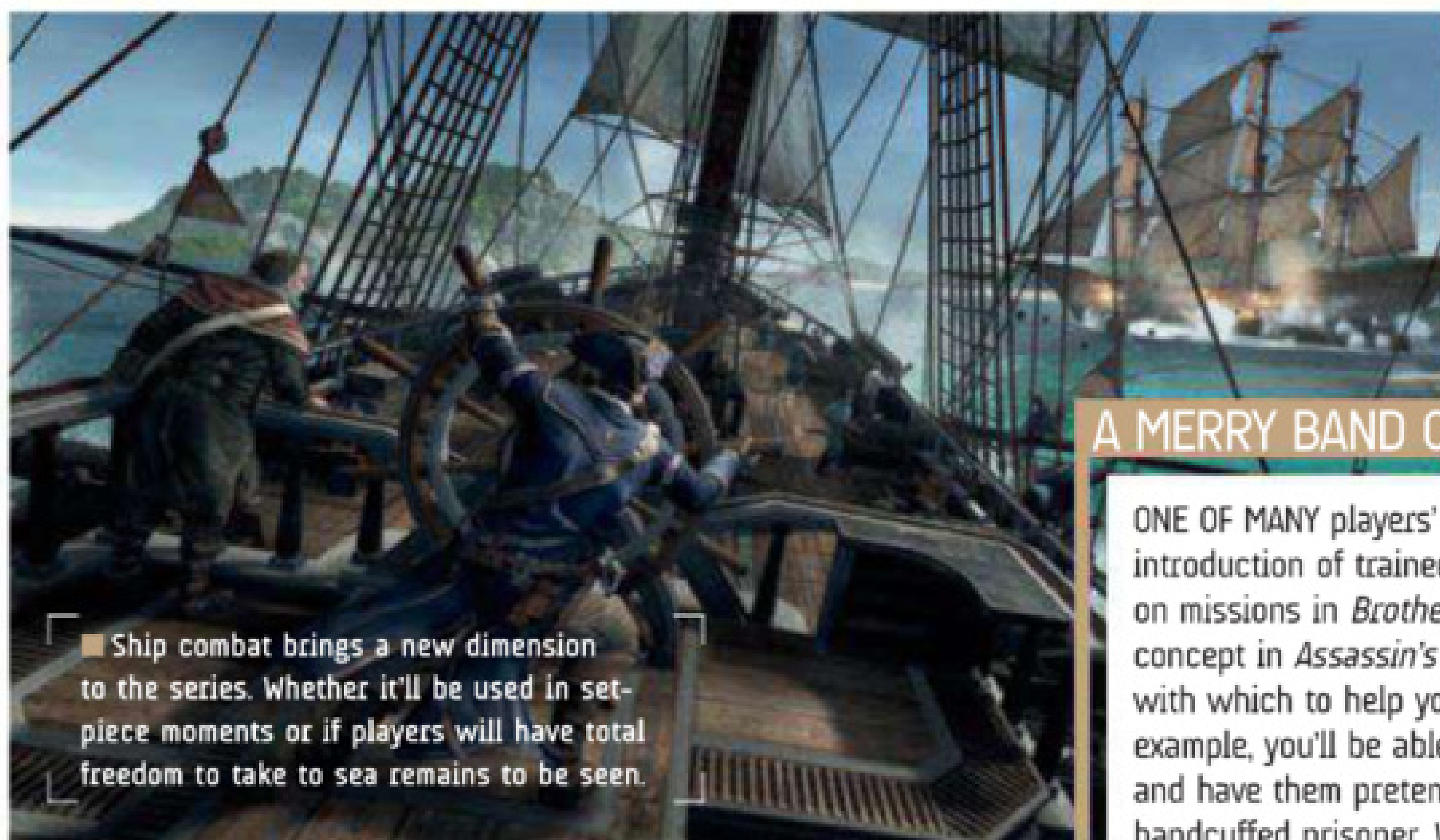
HALLDÓR FANNAR
CHIEF TECHNICAL OFFICER, CCP GAMES

It's amazing how the story and the art direction work together to create a game that truly moves you – with almost no dialogue. I also found it particularly clever how they solved the technical issues of having a sidekick. Back then, multiple games had attempted a sidekick mechanic, but the problem was always the same – the sidekick had issues with following you around and would repeatedly get stuck or get in your way. This was simply due to the fact that pathfinding and path following had not reached maturity, and we didn't have a lot of processor cycles to spare on complex solutions. Ico *solved this by having your sidekick role played by a scared young girl that you would have to drag around by holding her hand. Effectively, you were doing the entire pathfinding for her, and left alone she wouldn't move. This was just one of many aspects that* Ico *got right. Finishing that game was a very rewarding experience.*

"It's amazing how the story and the art direction work together to create a game that truly moves you"

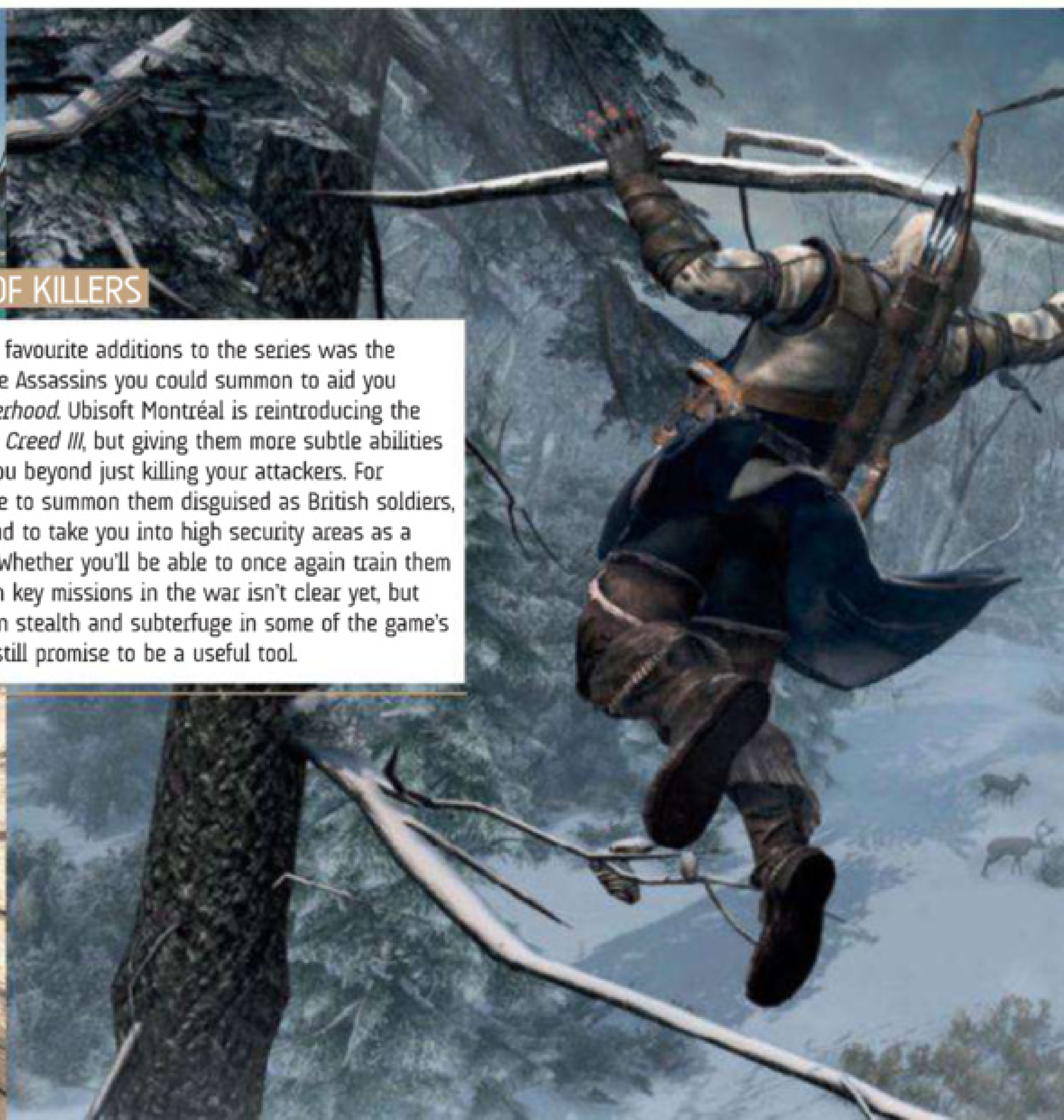
HALLDÓR FANNAR, CCP GAMES

PREVIEWS CONTENTS



Ship combat brings a new dimension to the series. Whether it'll be used in set-piece moments or if players will have total freedom to take to sea remains to be seen.





A MERRY BAND OF KILLERS

ONE OF MANY players' favourite additions to the series was the introduction of trainee Assassins you could summon to aid you on missions in *Brotherhood*. Ubisoft Montréal is reintroducing the concept in *Assassin's Creed III*, but giving them more subtle abilities with which to help you beyond just killing your attackers. For example, you'll be able to summon them disguised as British soldiers, and have them pretend to take you into high security areas as a handcuffed prisoner. Whether you'll be able to once again train them and send them out on key missions in the war isn't clear yet, but given the emphasis on stealth and subterfuge in some of the game's garrison towns they still promise to be a useful tool.

Urban stealth is still at the core of the game, with plenty of new ways for players to silently dispatch enemies in towns.

Assassin's Creed III

CONCEPT The *Assassin's Creed* saga ventures into the New World as Ubisoft Montreal attempts to combine gameplay freedom and spectacle of the highest order.

Sweet freedom at last!

It's rather fitting that *Assassin's Creed III* focuses heavily on freedom. Both narratively and in the gameplay sense, it's been a concept that has driven the franchise creatively up until this point. But videogames are still an evolving medium, and for all the series' visual flair and opportunity to explore the environment, there's arguably always a point where that freedom bumped up against gameplay limitations. Whether it was little imperfections in its parkour-based movement, stutters in the combat, or the often restrictive nature of its urban sandbox play environments, they all added up to show off the seams in Ubisoft's vision. But with *Assassin's Creed III*, everything is being crafted to hide those seams and give players a sense of total freedom.

With the game now divided into the vast wilderness sections that seamlessly tie into urban environments, that ideal is one step closer and the series' parkour-based movement system has been revamped to reflect that.

Your ability to traverse the environment – sweeping through the wilderness and treetops as Connor – has never been smoother, and weapons take advantage of its new subtitles. Players will be able to use them from previously impossible places, like tree branches or rock overhangs, adding the dimension of verticality to stealth kills. That freedom factors into combat as well, with a slew of added animations that let you kill on the run. So whether you're slaughtering redcoats or hunting animals in the wild, you're presented with a range of options as to how to approach every situation.

While we've yet to get a glimpse of *Assassin's Creed III*'s major city – New York – Ubisoft has been happy to show off how it's enhancing gameplay in the game's urban areas on the dirty streets of Boston. As well as showing some of Connor's new stealth kills – like hiding behind corners and silently killing foes that walk past, or using now-moving hay carts to move around the city undetected – Ubisoft has showcased how indoor environments will work in the game. While bigger buildings will need to load, there are a great many windows Connor will just be able to leap into, using buildings as chase breakers and a way to escape into stealth mode. When combined with the new fighting abilities and smoother traversal, it all just makes exploring cites feel far more dynamic, and gives the player a greater sense of freedom in how to approach missions.

/// But *Assassin's Creed III* isn't just about sharpening the series' existing gameplay mechanics, and at E3 Ubisoft demonstrated how the series can still wow with its spectacular set-pieces. While the team in Montreal has been refining gameplay on land, Ubisoft Singapore has been crafting the latest addition to series: control of your very own ship in naval battles against the British. Connor will take command of the ship Aquila, and it's a visually impressive experience as you control the vessel in third-person from behind him. Like everything else in *Assassin's Creed III*, the aim here is to immerse the player in the action, something that's helped by dynamic weather and wave systems that constantly toss the ship about. Your vessel handles in a dynamic fashion, and it's all incredibly cinematic, especially when you steer to bring your broadside cannons into line with an enemy ship and unleash a thunderous volley of cannon fire. The way enemy ships sink burning into the waters is incredibly satisfying, and there's a great sense of peril that comes from the fact that your own ship takes damage in real time as you battle. It isn't clear just yet how this navel gameplay will factor into the narrative, but we do know that Connor will be able to sail across a large section of the Eastern seaboard. If Ubisoft Montreal can find a way to ensure that the gameplay in its sprawling wilderness environments and far richer urban sandboxes can intersect with this sea-based addition in a meaningful way, we could see that promise of a wider, more realistic game world finally realised.

There's a reason they say 'third time's the charm', and while there have been more than three *Assassin's Creed* games to date it's easy to see why Ubisoft was reluctant to slap the *Assassin's Creed III* moniker on the previous sequels in the series. It's only here that everything looks like everything is finally coming together, offering players a level of freedom they've never had before. If Ubisoft can just give bland old Desmond an adventure fit to complement the historical plainswalking then it will be sitting on a shoo-in for game of the year.

> "The beauty of Assassin's is that if you do it right it's kind of a new IP"
> ALEX HUTCHINSON UBISOFT MONTREAL

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PSP, Xbox 360
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montréal
Release: October
Players: 1-TBA

Alex Hutchinson Profile

Alex Hutchinson is the creative director on *ACIII*, and no stranger to introducing gameplay innovations to new or existing franchises. Previously at EA Montreal he was creative director on *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* and lead designer at Maxis on *Spore*, *The Sims 2* and *The Urbz: Sims In The City*.

Alex Hutchinson History

Army Of Two: The 40th Day **2010 [Multi]**
Dante's Inferno **2010 [Multi]**
Spore **2008 [PC]**
The Sims 2 **2004 [Multi]**

High Point

Hutchinson deserves special mention as part of the design team behind *Spore*. It might not have totally come together but the multi-genre god game showed true flashes of innovation.

There's an impressive amount of freedom to explore the treeline using the revamped traversal system in *Assassin's Creed III*.

BLACK BEAUTY

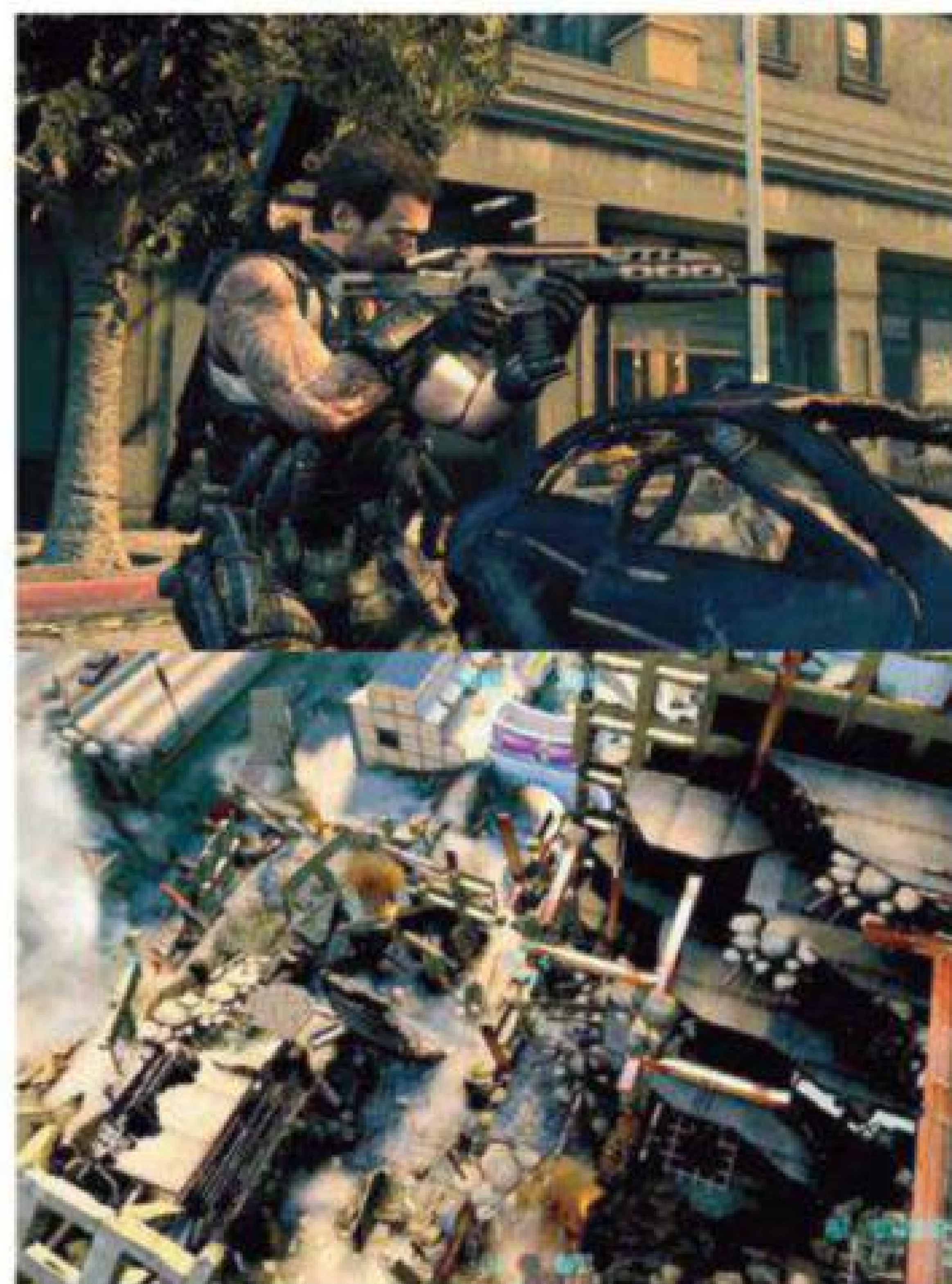
IT'S NOT JUST the in-game military technology that's advanced in *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*; it's also the tech being used to build the game. Just when you thought current-gen platforms couldn't be pushed any harder, Treyarch has overhauled many technical aspects of the game including lighting, frame-rate and motion capture.

The lighting is better – we could tell you exactly how, but there's not enough space and we wouldn't know what we were talking about anyway – and the frame-rate is now up to a constant 60 frames per second. At least, that's what Treyarch is aiming for.

There'll also be more mo-cap animation in the game than ever too. The team even brought a real, live horse into the studio and covered it in those little white balls. It must have thought they were mental.

■ Above: Normally we'd advise against bunching tightly together like this, but seeing as it makes the screenshot more interesting, we're going to let it slide.





■ Left: It has been decreed that all *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* screenshots shall feature drones. This one has five in it. Can you spot them all?

Call Of Duty: Black Ops II

CONCEPT ■ The sequel to *Black Ops*, and the first ever *Call Of Duty* game to be set in the future.

It's 9/11 all over again. That's not a score, by the way

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Treyarch
Release: 13 November
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Treyarch started life making swordfighting games for the PC then, when acquired by Activision in 2001, moved onto mostly developing ports and licensed titles. Console spin-off *Call Of Duty 2: Big Red One* was its first *Call Of Duty* and after *Spider-Man: Web Of Shadows*, it became a full-fledged *Call Of Duty* studio.

Developer History

Call Of Duty: Black Ops **2010 [Multi]**

Call Of Duty: World At War **2008 [Multi]**

Call Of Duty 3 **2006 [Multi]**

Spider-Man 2 **2004 [Multi]**

High Point

Call Of Duty: Black Ops was Treyarch's most critically acclaimed effort, so far and one of the biggest selling games of all time. Not bad for the 'other' *Call Of Duty* studio.

The good thing about having drones and robots and AI fight your wars for you is that if your enemy is shooting at your drones, then they're not shooting at people. The whole people getting shot thing is definitely the worst aspect of war, so military robots seem, on the face of it, to be a totally win-win idea.

But when you've seen the catastrophic vision of the near-future painted by *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*, you'll hope we never stop sending hundreds of young men and women to their deaths every year. It's just much safer that way.

The pretext of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* is that someone called Menendez – definitely a bad guy – has somehow obtained control of hundreds of the US's military's robotic units and is using them to attack major targets across the US.

Dave Mason – son of *Black Ops*' Alex Mason, and almost indistinguishable from him – finds himself on the ground in downtown Los Angeles, apparently on the day of a G-20 summit, so the place is absolutely crawling with world leaders. At least 20 of them.

One of those leaders is P.O.T.U.S., pronounced 'poh-tuss' – which is how all the characters in *Black Ops II* refer to the President Of The United States with straight faces – and Mason's first job, along with a small squad of other bristly tough guys, is to keep her alive while explodey death literally rains from the smoggy Californian sky. He does this by shooting everything in sight – you know the drill by now.

At one point, Mason mentions the full extent of Menendez's assault. Apparently, the Pentagon, Washington and Wall Street have all been hit in a coordinated attack on the same day, "...using our own aircraft."

Oh Mason... please... don't go there.

"I think we've heard this song before."

He went there.

/// If this witty and tasteful allusion to the senseless deaths of 3,000 innocent people is what Treyarch means when it refers to *Black Ops II*'s grounded, authentic, mature story then we'll just wallow gleefully in the non-stop action and pretend we can't hear what anyone's saying, which won't be hard because the explosions are loud and the acting flat.

> "Just when you think you know what's going on… maybe you don't know what's going on"
> MARK LAMIA TREYARCH

For the first time in a *Call Of Duty* game you have a distinct choice between the exploding corridor on the left and the exploding corridor on the right. So distinct are these choices, in fact, that they are sometimes clearly signposted on your HUD.

Here's an example: Approaching a gap in the freeway where something no doubt fell on it and exploded, you'll see the words 'Snipe' and 'Rappel' floating in the air over the freeway's crumbling edge. Walk towards 'Snipe' and you stay on the upper level providing sniper cover for Poh-Tuss and the other tough guys rappel down and edge along the underpass trying not to get exploded. Walk towards 'Rappel' and you go down straight away and get into the thick of the action.

Later on, there's a section where you can go either indoors or outdoors through a shopping plaza. There are lots of things to shoot whichever way you go, but if you go indoors you come out onto a balcony where you get a great view of a fighter jet crashing.

In the world of *Black Ops II*, world leaders are like Pokémon. Sort of. You've got to collect as many as you can. The US president is already under your care – next you've got to get the French one, whose name is P.O.F.

But just as you're closing on him, a building falls down, so you climb into a fighter jet and successfully take down a couple of dozen drones even though neither you nor Mason has ever flown before.

None of this makes any sense, but loads of stuff is going bang and bursting into the flames, so who cares?





■ Left: Shoot that drone enough times and it'll eventually explode. That big missile behind it, though, that'll never explode. It's probably a fake.





Above: We bet Quantic Dream motion captured the guy lying motionless on the floor, even though it was clearly unnecessary. Below: It's not *Heavy Rain 2*, but it does have heavy rain, too.





PLAYSTATION HOMELESS

DAVID CAGE said the idea for *Beyond: Two Souls* came from observing a homeless man on the Paris Metro apparently engaged in a heated conversation with someone who wasn't there, and thinking, "But what if there is someone there, but they're invisible?" Essentially then, Aiden – pronounced 'I-dun', as in 'I dun a bad' – is the embodiment (although that's *exactly* the wrong word – disembodiment?) of everyone's childhood invisible friend fantasy. The difference is that Aiden can impact on reality, but our invisible friends couldn't – no matter how much we claimed that it was them, and not us, that broke that window, or spilled that all over the sofa, or walked mud through the house, or…

Beyond: Two Souls

CONCEPT A cinematic adventure about a girl with an invisible friend. In the same vein as *Heavy Rain*, but with more action, exploration and freedom.

The darkest game about souls since Dark Souls

It was always going to be interesting to see what Quantic Dream was doing next, if only because we knew it wasn't going to be *Heavy Rain 2*. It was going to be something new and different; something we hadn't seen before.

And now we've seen it. It's *Beyond: Two Souls*, and it is new and different – although maybe, if we're being completely honest, not *that* new and different.

It's a new story and setting with new characters, sure. But it doesn't exactly look like a great departure from Quantic Dream's past work. The overall tone is very familiar – it's raining. Heavily. And it's dark. This is how Quantic Dream does mood.

Other concepts from Quantic Dream's past will be making a return too. For example, the manner in which, when playing as Aiden – the less visible of the two main characters – you can possess NPCs is reminiscent of *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*, in which you played as a soul hopping from body to body. Oddly, it's even more reminiscent of *Prototype* or, horror of horrors, feelplus' *Mindjack*.

Then there are Aiden's other powers. We know he can move non-living objects around, sometimes with great force, and we know he can surround Jodie in a protective barrier, but there are apparently even more tricks up his sleeve. Generally, they're not *so* different to the powers Lucas Kane gets in *Fahrenheit*. You've gotta go with what you know, we suppose.

But differences have been promised – differences such as better motion capture animation, for example. And yes, everything we've seen so far would suggest that, as you'd expect, this is *Beyond*'s strongest suit. The animation is all amazing, but there's not much more to say about that, so let's move on to… freedom. Or at least the illusion of it.

> "I try to have as few mechanics as I can because I don't like mechanics. Mechanics are the opposite of life"
> DAVID CAGE QUANTIC DREAM

Critics of *Heavy Rain* often take issue with that game's habit of forcing you to make irrational, illogical decisions in order to drive the plot in a required direction. For example, when playing as Ethan you couldn't use your common sense and choose to take a shoebox full of really good clues to the police. No, you *had* to follow the instructions of a mad man because it was a game and games are about completing series of challenges. But when discussing *Beyond*, David Cage uses words like 'freedom' and even 'sandbox', suggesting a far less





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: France
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Quantic Dream
Release: October
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Since its inception in 1997, David Cage's Paris studio has sought to do things differently. Debuting with unique PC adventure *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* in 1999, Quantic Dream has since established itself as an 'interactive storytelling' specialist and made a commercial impact with the 2 million-selling *Heavy Rain*.

Developer History

Heavy Rain
2010 [PlayStation 3]

Fahrenheit
2005 [Multi]

Omikron: The Nomad Soul
1999 [Multi]

High Point

David Cage described Heavy Rain as "an indie game with the financial support of a Triple-A title", and it was certainly a risky proposition for Sony. But, happily for all concerned, it paid off in a big way.

prescriptive style of play. The demo we've seen seemed comparatively narrow – as demos usually are – but Cage pointed out at least one major potential variation that could have occurred, but didn't.

We saw Jodie escape the police – first from a moving train, then through some woodland, and finally after an explosive confrontation at a gas station – but Cage insisted she could instead have been arrested, opening up a completely different section of the game, while presumably closing off most of what we saw.

Quantic Dream chose to show off the action-heavy alternative partly because action's always a better choice when you're trying to grab attention, but also because action sequences highlight another important difference between *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond*.

They *look* pretty similar – cinematic presentation punctuated by an on-screen prompt here and there – but they're different. They're different because you have direct control over Jodie pretty much the whole time. So if she's running through a forest, jumping over and ducking under fallen trees, then not only are you pressing buttons when prompted to do all the ducking and jumping, you're also pushing forward on the left stick to make her run. Maybe steering her too, although it's difficult to be sure how much control the player has when everything looks so cinematic.

Beyond: Two Souls looks to be a bolder, more confident take on the blueprint set down by Quantic Dream's previous efforts, with the team focussing on getting better at doing what it does. And why not? When you're already trying to take gaming in an ambitious new direction, there's no need for gimmicks or back-of-the-box bullet-points to sell your product. Though, with that said, 'Starring Ellen Page' is probably going to help.

Above: If you want explosions you've just got to figure out which SWAT cop is carrying grenades and possess him Below: This is Aiden's shield power in use. Jodie wouldn't dream of ploughing a motorcycle through a roadblock in the rain without it.





Above: Mess with Jodie's invisible friend and this is what happens. Everything's on fire, upside down or both, and the last remaining SWAT cop is lying on the tarmac wishing he had an invisible friend right now too. Or any friends at all, really.



COMPLEX CO-OP

■ WITH *WATCH DOGS*, Ubisoft is attempting an interesting twist on co-op wherein players are free agents whose objectives sometimes overlap. So if a player playing as Pearce has to evade the cops, another player standing on a nearby rooftop might be tasked with covering his escape route with sniper fire and a spot of hacking.

PLAY BEYOND THE SCREEN

■ MIRRORING ITS PREMISE, Ubisoft plans to take the *Watch Dogs* experience beyond the TV screen, with the ability to use your iPad to pull up maps and other information about the city you're playing in. You'll be able to use it to watch an interactive playback of your in-game actions, as the lines between *Watch Dogs* and reality blur.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: TBA
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal is Ubisoft's flagship development house, and one of the biggest game studios in the world. It's currently the home of *Assassin's Creed, Far Cry, Rainbow 6, Prince Of Persia* and many other brands, including the all-new *Watch Dogs.*

Developer History

Assassin's Creed: Revelations **2011 [Multi]**
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction **2010 [Multi]**
Prince Of Persia **2008 [Multi]**
Far Cry 2 **2008 [Multi]**
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction **2010 [Multi]**

High Point

While it was already well established at the start of this generation, it was *Assassin's Creed 2* that transformed Ubisoft Montreal into a force to be reckoned with.



GTA WITH A CYBER-TWIST

■ ITS CLEAR *Watch Dogs'* open-world gameplay will have its more traditional elements too – as the mysterious Aiden Pearce fights enemies hand-to-hand, hijacks cars and gets into gun fights – but the emphasis will be more on stealth and environmental manipulation.

Watch Dogs

CONCEPT ■ A violent, urban open-world adventure with the added twist of being able to hack any computer network in the city.

There's a new IP on the way – think you can hack it?

It's becoming increasingly unlikely that you're reading this printed on a sheet of paper. Chances are you're reading it off some kind of computer screen – a PC, a tablet, your phone… something that taps into a digital network and can in theory at least, be tapped into *on* that network. If you are reading a digital version of this, does someone, somewhere know that you are? Could they use that information against you? Probably not. But fears over privacy and security in an increasingly online world are very real. We might not all have had our bank account drained by internet fraudsters or our phone hacked by tabloid journalists, but we all know at least one person who's had their Facebook account hacked.

Of course though, there's a flipside to these fears. Imagine all the things you could do if you could access any computers around you at the touch of a button. Unlikely, but it's a fantasy perfect for a game premise.

Watch Dogs is that game. It's not clear how our hero, Aiden Pearce obtained the all-powerful gadgetry at his disposal, but he can tamper with any nearby computer using a simple smartphone. Remember, this is the digital age – *everything* is run by computers, *everything* is online, so he can, to a great extent, control the city.

We've seen him control traffic lights, bridges, trains, cars and other elements in Chicago's open world, to cause accidents and escape enemies. *Watch Dogs'* gameplay will also feature open-world driving, shooting and fighting, and a story driven by conspiracy and corruption, but it's this 'living city' premise that'll make it stand out. The 'using the environment as a weapon' idea isn't new, but Ubisoft has certainly hit upon a way of doing it that resonates strongly with the day-to-day lives of its audience, and we're looking forward to getting plugged into the wider network. 





■ Below Co-op play would've been the last mechanic we would have included, and Visceral has admitted that it will cause some fear to be dissipated. If you want a more horror-structured experience, going alone is still the way to do it.



Dead Space 3

CONCEPT ■ Visceral's much-respected survival-horror franchise takes an unexpected turn to try and merge *Call Of Duty*'s action with its own brand of horror.

It won't take a Necromorph to alienate the core fanbase

***Dead Space* has rightly been praised for how it kicked the survival-horror genre up the rear.** After years of slowly losing its way, someone needed to come along and remind people that games can elicit serious fear. It comes as some surprise, then, that *Dead Space 3* throws its previous template out the window entirely. While its debut showing starts with Isaac Clarke trapped aboard a vehicle, it's obvious that this isn't what we've come to expect – not only is it apparent that there's some sort of weather crashing against the hull, it's not the kind anyone would gladly be caught up in. Sure enough, *Dead Space 3* has taken on the extremely brave task of setting at least some of its narrative in the middle of a snowstorm on the frozen world of Tau Atlantis. It's certainly different and, in a way, genius. Rather than use shadows to create tension as you slowly sneak into the darkness, Visceral is using white to such a degree that it's almost impossible to see anything. Worse still, the raging wind has obstructed hearing too.

In much the same vein, it seems bizarre that Visceral would want to move away from the 'one man against the world' mentality of its most successful IP. When you feel alone, you're instantly more vulnerable and on edge. Come 2013, though, Isaac Clarke will be teamed up with John Carver, a mercenary complete with facial scar, soul patch and a foul temper that could've spewed out of any game from the last few years. To write him off as that so quickly would be unfair, however, as Visceral is keen to hint that there's more to Carver than another hit on the back of the box. Given the franchise's obsession with mental states, there's every chance Carver is far more interesting than simply 'entrant number two'.

/// The buck doesn't stop there, either. Combat in *Dead Space* has always been innovative and unique, the premise of dismembering enemy limbs appealing to a wide range of gamers. It should raise a few eyebrows, then, that Visceral has deemed the third instalment the right time to introduce a cover system. Certainly a smart move in terms of aligning it more with the first- and third-person shooters that light up the sales chart, but a slightly more questionable shift due to how the core game could be affected. Firefights were always prominent within the series, but the addition of cover seems to suggest they will be in abundance more, and that the focus will be firmly on how action-orientated they are. Visceral has shied away from a 'sticky' wall-based mechanic at least, with Isaac instead crouching into a protected

> "It's really come out of, what would be very different yet feel really threatening and create the sense of survival?"
>
> STEVE PAPOUTSIS VISCERAL GAMES

WHITER THAN WHITER

ALTHOUGH THE move away from the dark, murky setting of *Dead Space* and its sequel certainly seems odd, Visceral doesn't see it as too significant a departure. Stating that the franchise has always been built around a key set of components – limited visibility, the use of sound and the layers of an environment – means everything the studio has learnt over the last few years can be applied to this new template. Furthermore, the team is confident that the addition of snow actually introduces more options to discover. It can now play with the depth of what can be physically seen, how thick the snow is and how shifting these parameters affects your movement and targeting.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Origin:
US
Publisher:
EA
Developer:
Visceral Games
Release:
2013
Players:
1-TBA

Developer Profile

Formerly known as EA Redwood Shores, Visceral churned out forgotten also-rans such as *The Lord Of The Rings: The Third Age* and *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing*, before it was given far more creative freedom and developed the much-loved *Dead Space* that it made a significant mark on the industry.

Developer History

Dead Space 2
2011 [Multi]
Dante's Inferno
2010 [Multi]
Dead Space
2008 [Multi]
The Godfalther: The Game
2006 [Multi]

High Point

The *Dead Space* franchise has proven to be both a critical and commercial hit for EA and Visceral, and is easily the game the developer has become most recognised for.

position if he is in the right place to do so.

More controversial than this is Visceral's decision to welcome human enemies into its concept. It may be commonplace to shoot your fellow man in every other shooter under the sun, but *Dead Space* has always simply been about surviving the Necromorph onslaught. It was rare to even come across another living human being, let alone have to gun one down. Mostly due to the Unitologists now being a visible threat, this is no longer the case, although the alien menace will also return, meaning the studio does have the chance to experiment with the adversaries you face, especially if a dead human can come back to life as a necromorphised version of their former self.

These changes continue where weapons are involved too. The power to systematically target and chop off limbs struck a chord with fans of the series, but that's apparently not enough for the third in the trilogy. Seemingly influenced by the always powerful RPG, *Dead Space 3* will introduce a crafting and customisation angle through the use of component parts. Out of all the changes Visceral has decided to unveil so far this is, arguably, the most expected, especially because previous instalments always teased what you could do with your weaponry. Whether or not the modifications you can make are purely for attack is not yet known, but there's every chance armour, visibility and other skills will also be added to enable Isaac to level-up throughout the experience. Ultimately, it feels as though Visceral, unsure of how to progress the series in an organic way, has simply wiped the slate clean and started all over again, leaving fans clinging onto the hope that *Dead Space 3* will somehow retain the identity of its near-flawless predecessor, and still hold the power to turn grown gamers into gibbering cowards.



■ Above: The worry when it comes to having a second player is how heavy the action will be as a result. *Dead Space* had it very well weighted before, and pushing it too much will see it lose some of its magic. John Carver, however, may not actually be all he seems, so there's still some room for surprises...





■ Above: It's a shame that many of the leaked details from a few months ago were true, taking the wind a little bit out of *Dead Space 3*'s sails, but Visceral's shift to snow has become an intriguing talking point. Let's just hope it doesn't lose the tension that served the last two games so well.


1


2

The Elder Scrolls Online

CONCEPT ■ Taking the rich mythos of the *Elder Scrolls* universe and translating it to a pervasive online MMO, with a focus on single-player missions.

The Elder Scrolls series takes a bold step into a new world

Pitching an incredibly expansive MMO extension of the *Elder Scrolls* brand should be the easiest thing in the world. The realm of Tamriel is nothing if not a versatile tabletop representing the very best of fantasy fiction; a lush backdrop fuelling exploration, a dense mythology and colossal creatures anchored within a gritty aesthetic and tone. Yet *The Elder Scrolls Online* is not a massively multiplayer *Skyrim* with a few raids chucked into the mixing pot. The art direction based on Scandinavian myth has been ditched in favour of a vibrant, almost cartoony visual palette, with Tamriel broadened to feature the entire geography of the sprawling world, reimagined for this online outing. Yet these changes not only confirm *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s mass-market appeal, but herald the arrival of an ambitious *Elder Scrolls* experience unlike anything developed before.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: US
Publisher: Bethesda
Developer: ZeniMax Online
Release: 2013
Players: Massively multiplayer

Elder Scrolls Profile

Elder Scrolls was conceived as a gladiator game with some supplementary side-quests, but grew into a full RPG. Its sequel, *Daggerfall*, added a richer fantasy realm, and subsequent sequels have all contributed to one of the most epic role-playing sagas around.

Elder Scrolls History

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim **2011 [Multi]**
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion **2006 [Multi]**
The Elder Scrolls III: Morrownd **2002 [Xbox]**
The Elder Scrolls: Arena **1994 [DOS]**

High Point

Skyrim's vision is simply breathtaking. It's a testament to its design that after hundreds of hours we're still finding something new.

1 IT'S SET 1,000 YEARS BEFORE SKYRIM

SKYRIM'S SEISMIC impact has elevated expectation levels for *The Elder Scrolls Online*, but don't expect the spin-off to simply ride on the coattails of its success. *The Elder Scrolls Online* takes place in a more pliable time period, set a millennium before the events in *Skyrim* – during the Second Era – and using the entire geographical landscape of Tamriel for the game's setting. So while players will battle in factions for the Emperor's throne, the worlds of Morrowind, Daggerfall and Skyrim will be major waypoints in your quest.



3



4







"The entire team is committed to creating the best MMO ever made – and one that is worthy of The Elder Scrolls franchise"

MATT FIROR ZENIMAX ONLINE



5

2 WHO ARE THE FACTIONS?

LOCATIONS AND races will feel familiar to *Elder Scrolls* veterans. Discontent is rife across Tamriel, and three warring factions have emerged to contend for the Throne. The first of the three is the Aldmeri Dominion, composed of Altmer, Bosmer and Khajiit, while the Daggerfall Covenant features Bretons, Redguards and Orcs, and the Ebonheart Pact comprises Dunmer, Nords and Argonians. Purists may balk at the idea of some of these alliances but the narrative has a larger scope that should satisfy fans of the single-player counterpart.

3 IT'S STILL ABOUT A LONE WARRIOR

MMO GAMES are inclusive, party-centric experiences wherein an indissoluble community accompanies the joys of discovery and scale. While PvP and dungeon raiding remain key gameplay components, there's still a solitary hero at the core of each player's journey through the main storyline. ZeniMax Online wanted to maintain many of the core gameplay tenets of the *Elder Scrolls* series, and keeping the focus on one character was one of the primary goals the developer sought to achieve when development began five years ago.

4 IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ELDER SCROLLS

IN A decision that's likely to sour the anticipation of fans, *The Elder Scrolls Online* finds itself with a less-than-striking visual design that more closely resembles *EverQuest* than the pallid fields and stone structures present within *Skyrim*. Uninspiring as it may appear, to judge it superficially would be to miss the point: the art design is crucial for reaching a wider demographic of PC gamers without gargantuan gaming setups. However, expect plenty of refinements before the game's release in 2013.

5 THE SCALE IS FAR BIGGER THAN BEFORE

THE SHEER scale of the conflict raging through the centre of *The Elder Scrolls Online* is beyond anything previously witnessed in the series to date. 100-a-side PvP battles will be commonplace, as factions will battle for territorial dominance, tilting the war for the kingdom in the favour of the victor of each of these huge skirmishes. As each side vies for control of the capital city and gradually gains more territory across Tamriel, players and alliances will be rewarded with quicker levelling and various perks and stat boosts.



The move to Platinum Games should serve *Rising* well, as Kojima Productions' original plans to integrate this type of gameplay into the usual *Metal Gear Solid* world clearly proved to be an issue. As a straight-up action game from a well-versed developer, it can now hope to succeed.





THE ROAD IS LONG

ONE OF THE most bizarre and difficult development cycles in recent times, at one point *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* was cancelled. It was only when Kojima decided that Platinum Games would be a good fit that the project started back up. It was here that the 'Solid' in the title got removed in order to mark a step away from the *Metal Gear* series. Thankfully, original voice actors have been brought back in order to keep *Rising* firmly within the same universe. It also, seemingly, has left Kojima time to develop his new game engine and start work on a proper sequel for next-generation machines.

Above: In order to live up to the mayhem you may remember from *Metal Gear Solid 4* and the unconventional scenarios Platinum is almost famous for, Raiden will be taking down helicopters.
Right: Raiden has gone through more visual changes than almost any other character we can think of, and here Platinum Games seems to have tweaked him a little bit more yet again. It's most certainly still the man we remember, if you ignore the fact he's probably not technically a man any more.





Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

CONCEPT ■ *Bayonetta* creator Platinum Games takes its unique style of development to give Raiden and *Metal Gear* an interesting, if not somewhat strange, re-branding.

Platinum takes Raiden's action adventure back to the cutting board

***Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* was dead.** An idea apparently too far for Konami, its dreams of introducing Raiden into a world where he could 'cut everything' were slowly cancelled as Hideo Kojima started to toy with other, more advanced things – until the legendary developer was reminded of Platinum Games. "Mr. Kojima initially approached us so casually, we thought he was joking," producer for the studio Atsushi Inaba recently told **games™**. "I remember being in the crowd at the 2010 E3 conference where *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* was revealed and watching excitedly, which influenced my feelings. Thinking back, I think Mr. Kojima was probing us to see if there was a chance we would take the job. He must have noticed how excited I looked. To be honest, I thought to myself, 'If we can pull off this collaboration, it will be something really special.' I was truly excited."

It's something of a surprise, especially because Platinum wasn't just trying to resurrect a game, but apply its unique brand of action to a template that already existed. "We had to take so many things into consideration during this period so we could get to work on remaking the game," Inaba continues. "Bringing the Platinum Games touch to the title while staying true to the *Metal Gear* franchise, pushing the reset button on Kojima Productions' *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* while still exploiting the parts of that game that worked. It took a good chunk of time."

For the developer itself, the opportunity it represents is huge. From relatively tough beginnings to making a mark with its last two titles, this is the game where Platinum can become a true force within the industry, even if it has to restrict some of its ideas to keep in line with the beast that is *Metal Gear*. As Inaba explains: "The *Metal Gear* world is firmly established, and Platinum Games does not have free rein to do as we please. Instead, we all approach things from the standpoint that the gameplay should be very Platinum Games-esque, and from that point of view we have been pretty free to design the action game elements to our liking."

/// It's these elements that are still a major unknown, though, especially when you consider *Metal Gear Solid: Rising*, as it was first known, has existed in some form since 2009. Kenji Saito, Platinum's director, has some answers. "There are three basic action systems to the game: Normal attacks, Slash mode and sub-weapons.

"Slash mode can be employed in a number of situations – for example, after weakening an enemy with normal attacks, or knocking them off their feet with a combo. You can launch them into the air, leaping upwards to hack them apart. Slash mode offers a tremendous amount of freedom for the player in how he decides to deliver the killing blow. Sub-weapons let you employ some of the things you've seen in previous games, like grenades or rocket launchers, against enemies. We've also included some of the props series fans love so that allow you to take enemies by surprise, then launch into Slash mode to make them pay. Finally, there is what we are calling Ninja Run, which is a 'dash mode' that takes advantage of that fact that Raiden is a cyborg to give gamers a way to move about at high-speed, hurdling over obstacles with ease."

All fine in theory, but a game of this ilk both needs and deserves some hands-on play to see if it can live with the heavy-hitters of the genre. We take solace, though, in the developer's short-lived history. *Vanquish* perked up the third-person shooter, while *Bayonetta* actually gave action fans something to care about for the first time in an age. Could Platinum be relying on these premises to shape *MGR: Revegeance*? "*Vanquish* is a third-person shooter, a totally different genre," Saito explains. "*Bayonetta*, on the other hand, does share the action genre and so they share a key focus – they have to feel great to play. We are approaching *Revengeance* with a focus on the same great control response you found in *Bayonetta*."

> "Those lessons we learn [through Metal Gear Rising] will allow us to step-up our game as a company"
>
> ATSUSHI INABA PLATINUM GAMES

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: Q4 2012
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed from the ashes of Capcom's Clover Studio, Platinum has had a hit-and-miss ride. *MadWorld* and *Infinite Space* failed to set the world on fire, but *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* bucked this trend.

Developer History

Vanquish **2010 [Multi]**
Bayonetta **2010 [Multi]**
Infinite Space **2009 [DS]**
MadWorld **2009 [Wii]**

High Point

Bayonetta, which followed the journey of an extremely sexualised witch with insane hair, breathed a tremendously refreshing gust of air back into the action genre.





■ Left: Looks like Vamp. Smells like Vamp. Is probably Vamp. How that makes any sense given the events of *Metal Gear Solid 4* is anyone's guess, but when has Kojima ever really stuck to logic? ■ Above: Despite the shift, environments and enemies that have been mainstays in Snake's dimension have made the trip across.



1 DOWNPLAYING lightsabers and force powers, *1313* tells a darker tale set within the *Star Wars* universe. The gameplay reflects this edgier take on the licence, using conventional cover mechanics to emphasise close-quarter combat and intense gunplay.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, TBC
Origin: US
Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC
Players: 1-TBC

Star Wars Game Profile

The *Star Wars* videogame legacy is as shaky and inconsistent as every other offshoot of the fiction. While straight tie-ins have been a mixed bag, the most successful adaptations have often strayed away from the traditional template, with *X-Wing, Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Star Wars Episode I: Racer* sterling expansions of the universe.

Franchise History

Star Wars: The Old Republic **2011 [PC]**

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy **2006 [Multi]**

Star Wars Episode I: Racer **1999 [N64]**

Star Wars: X-Wing **1993 [PC]**

High Point

Lego Star Wars is a suitably charming combination of nostalgia, hilarity and accessibility. Perfect for big and little kids alike.

Star Wars 1313

CONCEPT ■ A mature action-adventure game set within the *Star Wars* universe explores the seedy underbelly of George Lucas's galaxy far, far away.

Could LucasArts' dark take on the franchise be the first look at the next-gen?

While the storytelling quality of the last three *Star Wars* movies is something of a contentious issue, there's little question that for all George Lucas' failings as an auteur he has been at the forefront of some of the biggest innovations in the movie business. So it's with the combined might of some of his greatest accomplishments (digital effects house Industrial Light & Magic, cutting-edge animators Lucasfilm Animation and audio engineers Skywalker Sound) that LucasArts has focused on high production values for the latest videogame offshoot of the intergalactic soap opera.

Every effort has been made to make *Star Wars 1313* as close to the cinematic presentation of the films as possible, immersing players into a seamless mix of spectacle, action gameplay and narrative. While LucasArts is keen to stress that the game is only in pre-production at the present, *1313* appears to be a genuine first look at next-gen console gaming.

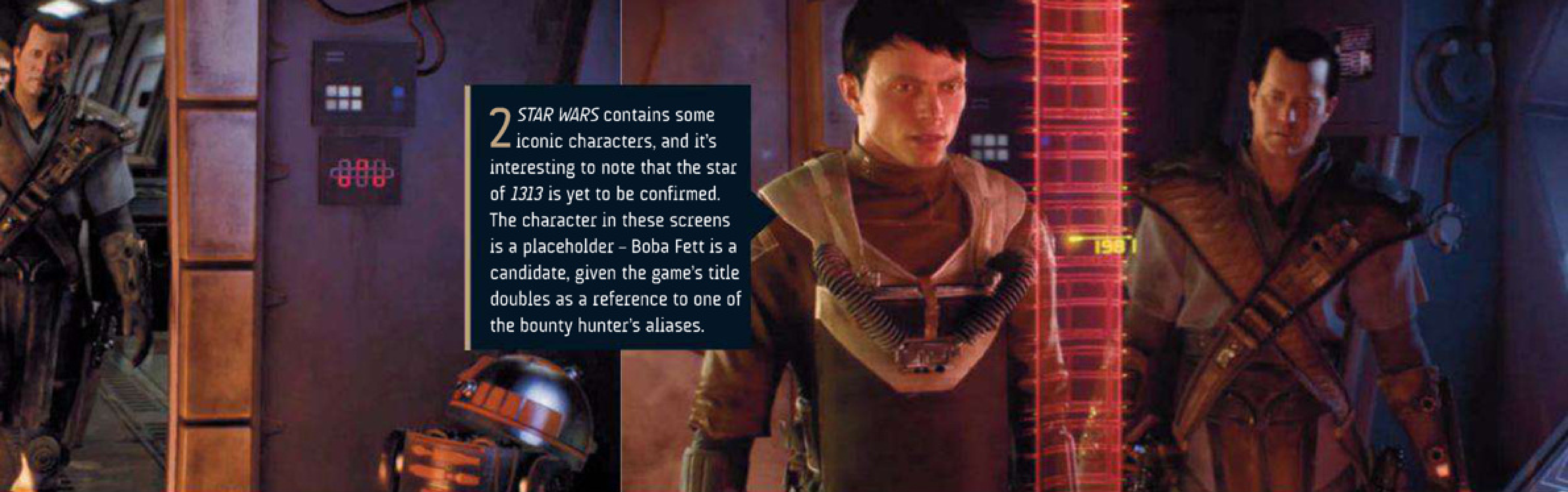




4 ONE OF the most visually arresting attendees at this year's E3, the only platform *Star Wars 1313* has been confirmed for is PC, which has led many to speculate that LucasArt's dark take on Lucas' universe is destined for next-gen platforms.



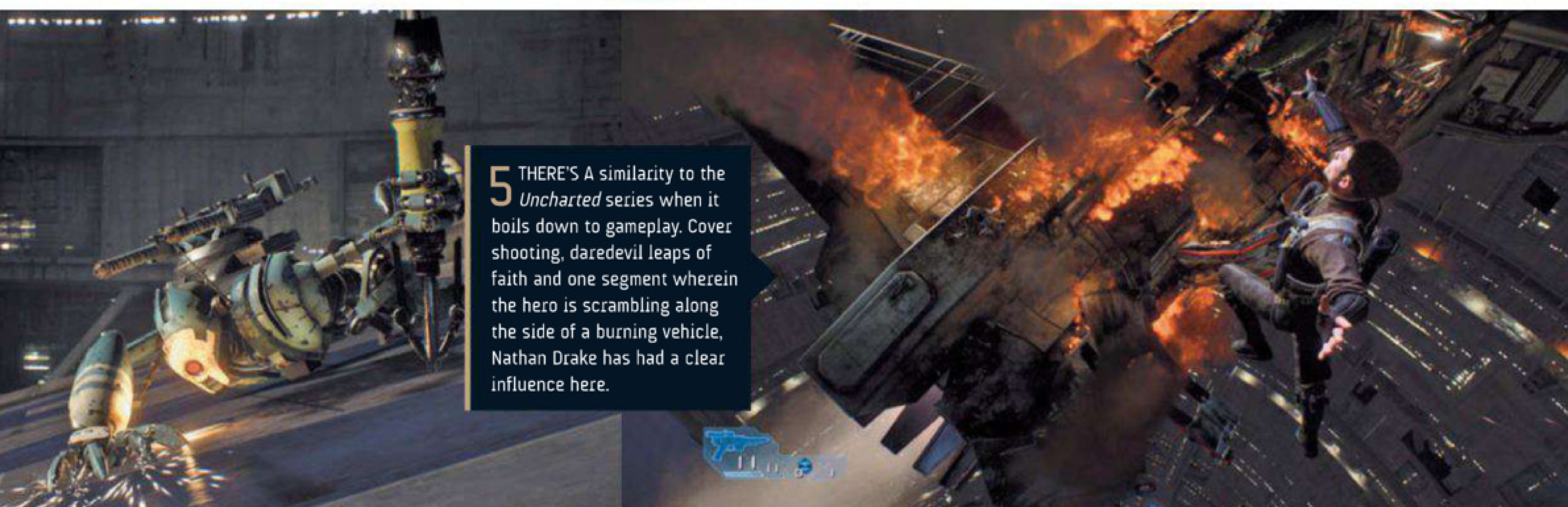
6 NOTICE THE blood? *Star Wars* has often shied away from violence – hence why robots were the primary villains for much of the prequel trilogy – but *1313* indulges adult themes. It's suggested *1313* may act as a primer to the live-action TV series in the works.



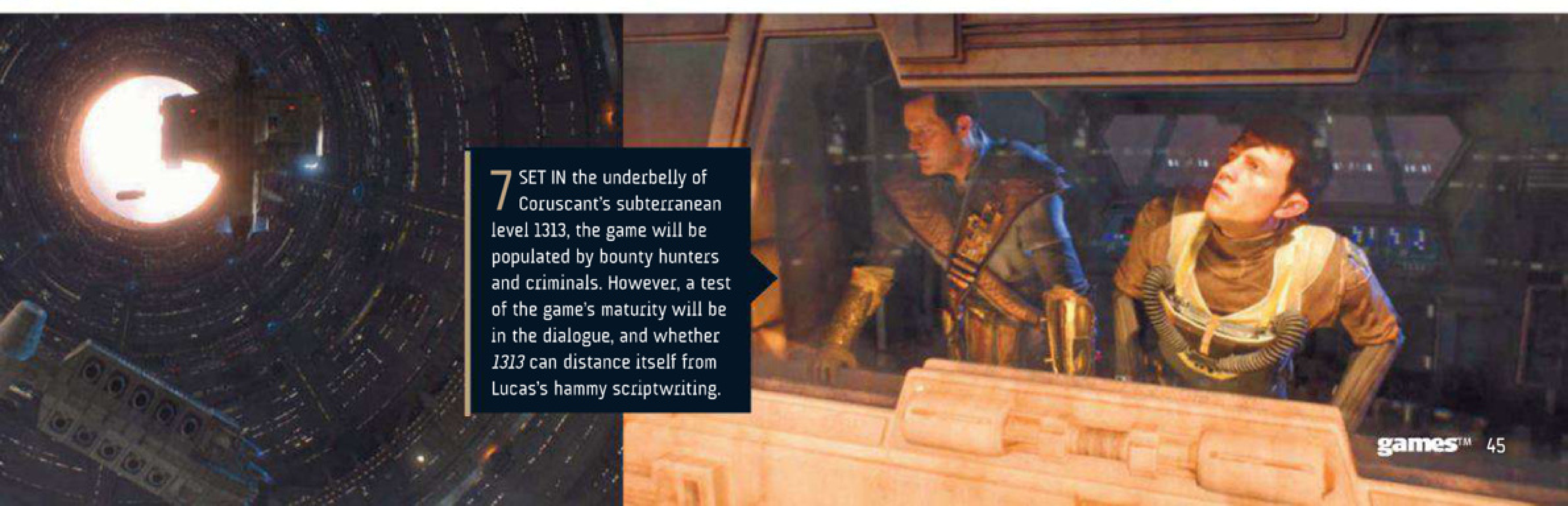
2 *STAR WARS* contains some iconic characters, and it's interesting to note that the star of *1313* is yet to be confirmed. The character in these screens is a placeholder – Boba Fett is a candidate, given the game's title doubles as a reference to one of the bounty hunter's aliases.



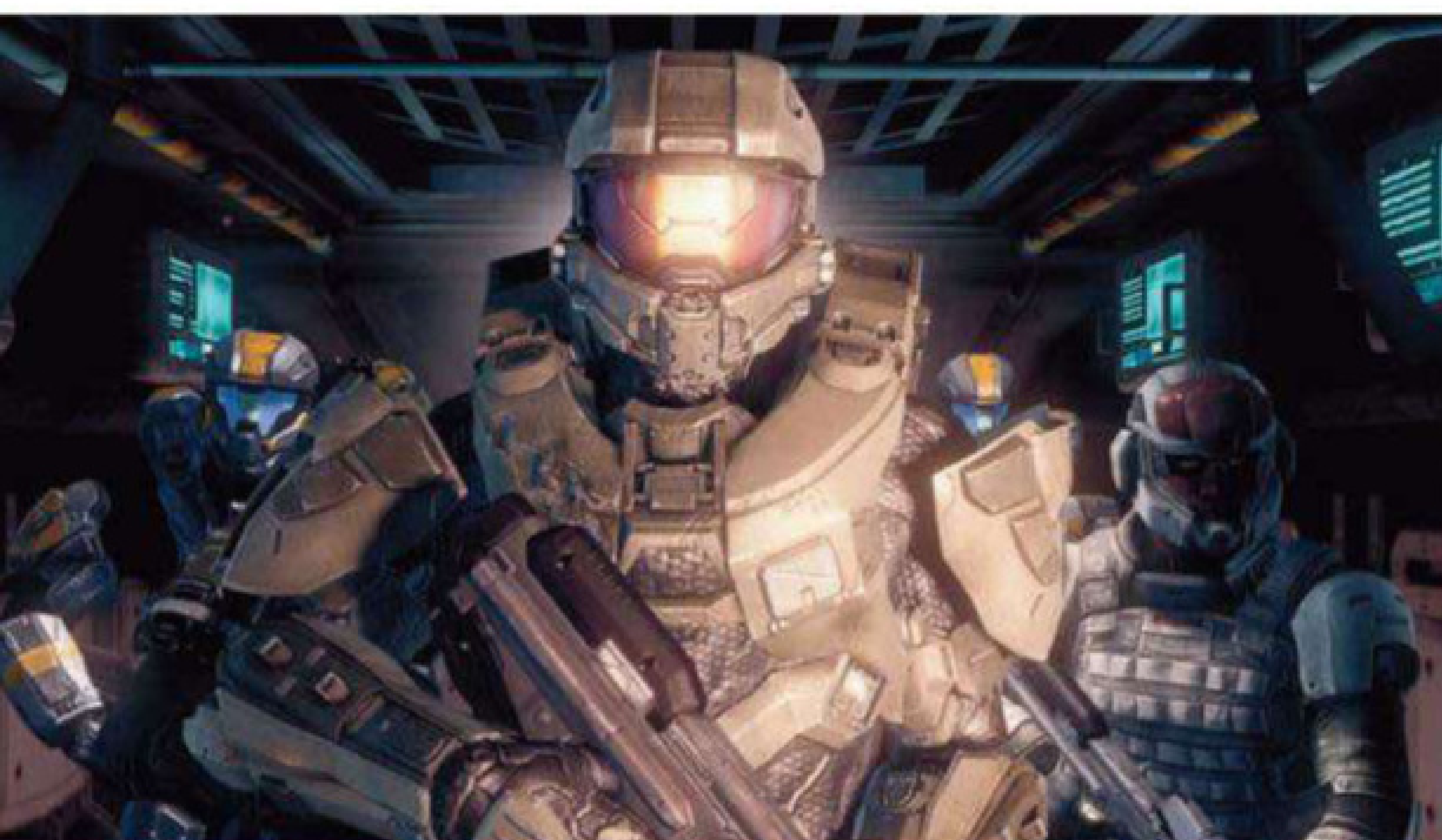
3 YOU CAN clearly see where ILM, Lucasfilm Animation and Skywalker Sound have had an influence on *1313*'s design. From the blaster sounds to the cinematic lighting and even the fizz of each blaster shot, it's the quintessential *Star Wars* game in many respects.



5 THERE'S A similarity to the *Uncharted* series when it boils down to gameplay. Cover shooting, daredevil leaps of faith and one segment wherein the hero is scrambling along the side of a burning vehicle, Nathan Drake has had a clear influence here.



7 SET IN the underbelly of Coruscant's subterranean level 1313, the game will be populated by bounty hunters and criminals. However, a test of the game's maturity will be in the dialogue, and whether *1313* can distance itself from Lucas's hammy scriptwriting.





■ Above: Cortana reckons these things are not organic, but what about those little arms poking out of its chest? There's *something* organic in there, surely? Below: Classic *Halo* weapons make their return, but the Master Chief will also be able to pick up and use powerful new weapons dropped by his mysterious and deadly robotic foes.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: 343 Industries
Release: 6 November
Players: TBA

Frank O'Connor Profile

Former games journalist Frank O'Connor joined Bungie as content manager during *Halo 2*'s development, and became a familiar name among *Halo* fans thanks to his community management skills.

Frank O'Connor History

Halo: Combat Evolved – Anniversary **2011 [Xbox 360]**

Halo 3 **2007 [Xbox 360]**

Halo 2 **2004 [Xbox]**

High Point

O'Connor's biggest achievement is probably developing one of the biggest, most loyal game communities. Given the authority he now holds at 343, a career high point is no doubt still to come.

Halo 4

CONCEPT ■ Master Chief's fourth full-fat adventure sees him in search of a captured UNSC flagship.

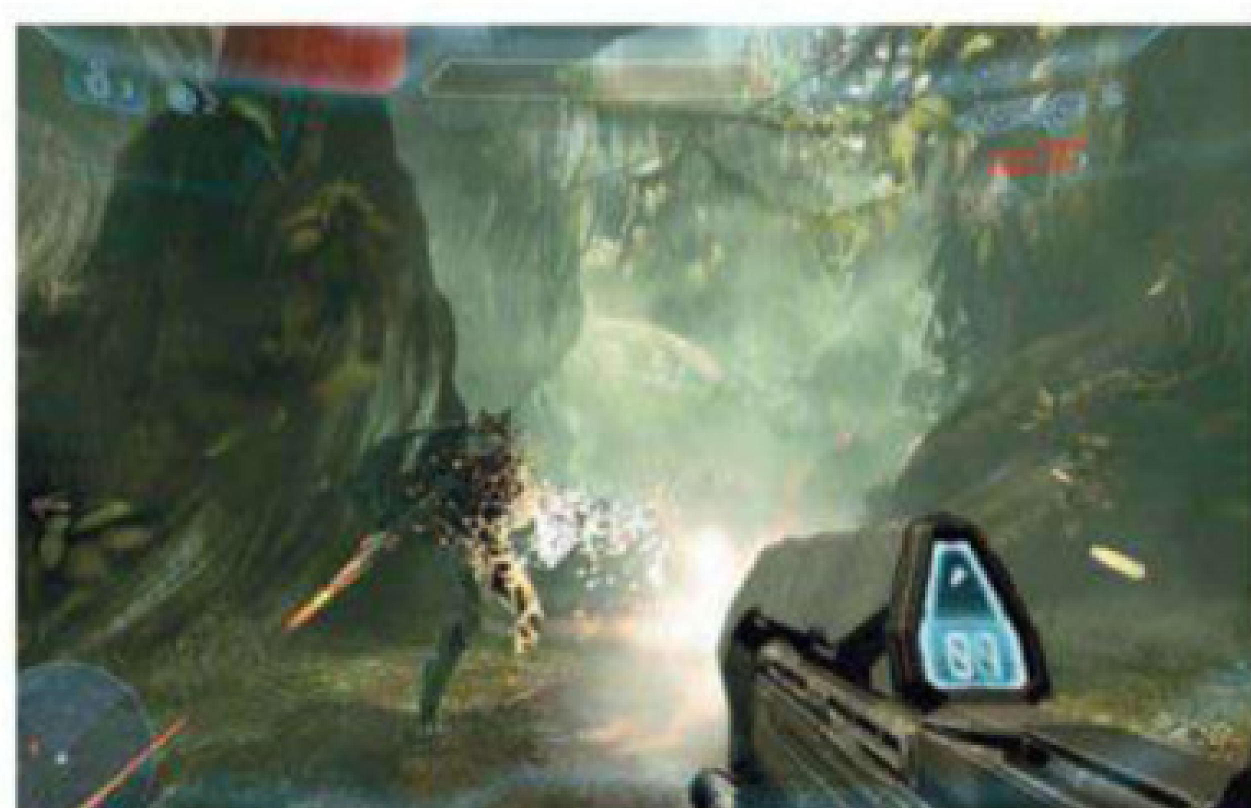
Microsoft's Halo super-studio kicks off a new trilogy

Nothing like 343 Industries has ever happened before. No other publisher has ever head-hunted over 200 of the most talented, most experienced people in game development, stuck them together in a big building and said, 'Make us the biggest, best, most successful game in our history. You've got till November 2012.' It's a new thing, it's how Microsoft has decided to get *Halo 4* made, and it really might not work.

343 Industries is a team. Some teams are greater than the sum of their parts, but many are considerably less. Talented individuals don't necessarily gel, particularly when they're thrown together from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. It could all turn out to be a horrifically expensive mistake.

But you know what? We've seen *Halo 4* now and… obviously it's way too early for a verdict, but it looks very impressive, doesn't it? Sure, we haven't seen anything massively different or new or revolutionary, but there's no denying *Halo 4* looks *quality*.

Staunch fanboys might object, but abandoning the bright, angular, primary coloured *Halo* style of old has done it a world of







good. It's not photorealistic, by any means, but *Halo 4* does have a new depth and level of detail to it that lends it atmosphere and believability. It doesn't just look good; it looks absorbing and satisfying. Like a massive rum baba.

And that's just the single-player campaign. We haven't even got onto the multiplayer yet, although single-player and multiplayer are one and the same from now on. Kind of.

/// Multiplayer isn't just an arbitrary *game* thing any more, it's an intrinsic part of the *Halo* story. And it ties in with the new, innovative Spartan Ops mode. Both multiplayer – which has been fancily renamed 'War Games' – and Spartan Ops chronologically take place after the single-player campaign. Spartan Ops is a series of daily, episodic missions, averaging about 20 minutes in length, that 343 is promising to run for months. These episodes will largely centre around teams of Spartans beaming down from the UNSC Infinity to the planet's surface, and War Games will represent the advances training simulation systems aboard the ship. Given what we've seen of main campaign's opening, the single-player mode will likely consist of Master Chief's journey across the planet's surface to where the Infinity has been brought down. Then it'll climax with him liberating it, probably just by asking nicely.

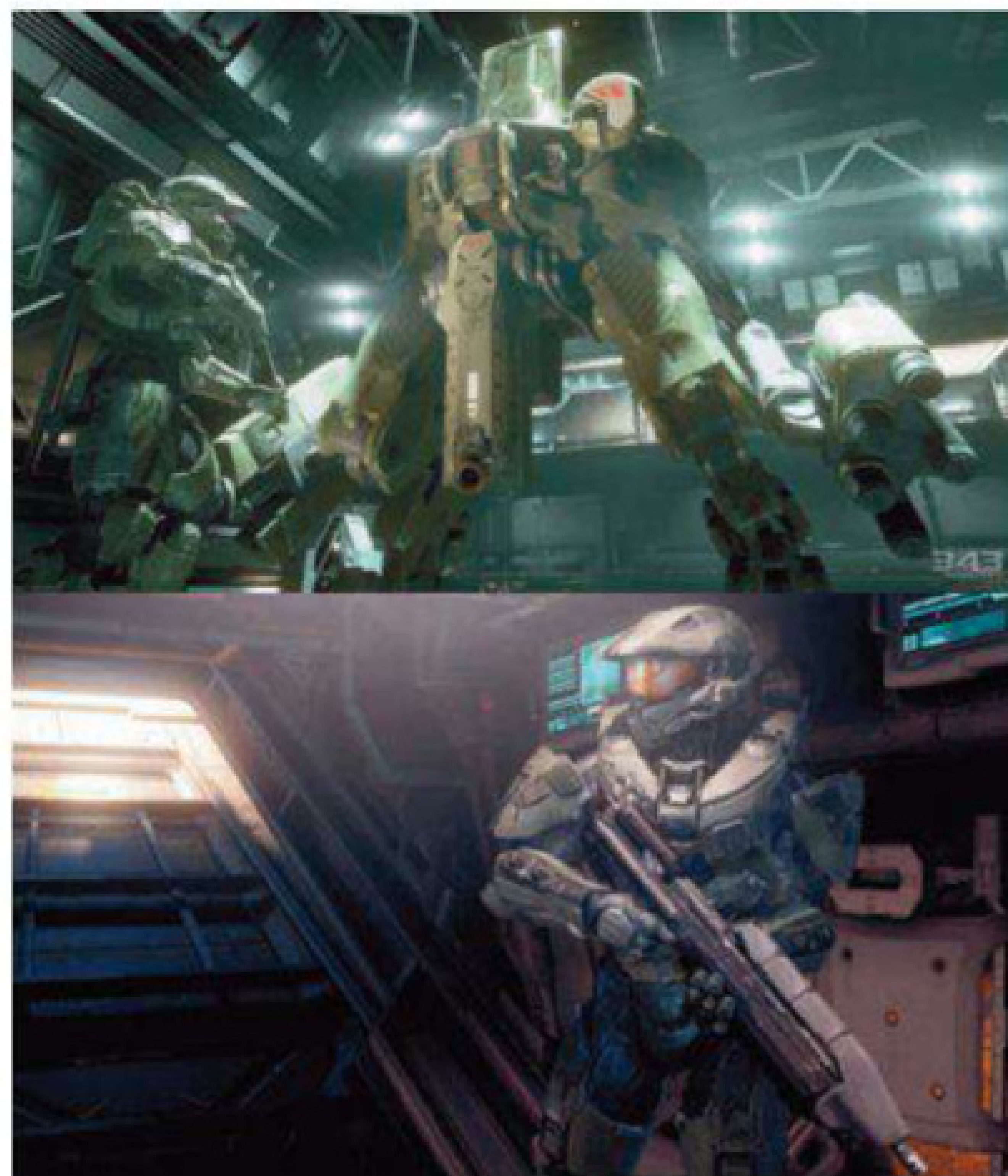
Just kidding. He'll do it all by shooting loads of stuff. We promise.

While you don't have to complete the main campaign before dedicating the rest of your life to Spartan Ops and War Games, that would be the logical way to go about it. You liberate the Infinity then you create your very own Spartan and start training him or her up between daily Spartan Ops missions. Furthermore, you use the same character across each mode, so XP earned in one game mode benefits you in the other. It seems Microsoft and 343 understand that the point of downloadable content should be to keep people playing your game in the long term and not just to squeeze more money out of them – the free episodic DLC is a great idea, no matter how you look at it. We're sure there'll be some paid-for downloadable goodies at some point too, new War Games content and possibly even a second 'season' of Spartan Ops, but still...

> "We're the only studio in the world trying to something quite as crazy as what we're trying to do"
> **NEILL HARRISON 343 INDUSTRIES**

So, it looks great and it's innovating in some inarguably fan-friendly ways – despite our pre-E3 concerns, it's difficult to find fault in *Halo 4* at this point. It looks like the super-studio idea *is* actually working, which is perhaps because of one important detail we forgot to mention in the opening paragraph. The most important quality each and every member of the 343 team brings to *Halo 4* isn't their talent or experience; it's their love of *Halo*. Over 200 of the world's most hardcore *Halo* fans are making *Halo 4* and, so far, it shows.

Below If Master Chief doesn't get to pilot that thing then millions of *Halo* fans will have tantrums on the internet. For a change.



FANTASTIC FORERUNNERS

EASILY THE least surprising 'reveal' made of *Halo 4* so far is that Master Chief is to face off against Forerunner enemies. While the Chief and Cortana are all, 'What are these things? This weapon is... Forerunner technology!' and so on, anyone who's been paying attention over the past year has been saying, 'Forerunners? No shit,' in a really sarcastic tone of voice.

Just because they're not surprising, though, doesn't mean the Forerunners aren't really cool. They look awesome, with their stylish orange highlights, and they present a completely new combat style to battle against, along with a new selection of weapons to pinch.





Left The *Halo* series has always drawn inspiration from various cinematic sci-fi films, but the huge forested environments of the Forerunner world in *Halo 4* bear more than a passing resemblance to Pandora in James Cameron's *Avatar*. Who says the art of subtle homage is dead?

Splinter Cell: Blacklist

CONCEPT ■ Jade Raymond's long-rumoured *Splinter Cell* project shows a very different approach and angle for the almost decade-old franchise.

Ubisoft preps Sam Fisher for the Call Of Duty crowd

***Splinter Cell* has felt the influence of the modern-day videogame industry.** As gamers, apparently, clamber for a more direct, intense and, naturally, fast-paced experience, *Blacklist*, the recently revealed new iteration of the long-running stealth franchise, does everything possible to follow suit. It's the right move...

With *Chaos Theory* still considered the most successful embodiment of what the original game set out to do, *Blacklist* marks a new dawn for where *Splinter Cell* may end up. Designed to turn Sam Fisher into a one-man killing machine who still operates within the shadows, it's the new mechanic 'killing in motion' that blurs the lines. Based on a similar concept to *Conviction*'s Mark and Execute – which itself makes a triumphant return – *Blacklist* will deliver the opportunity to eradicate numerous enemies while on the run. Within that context you'd be well within your rights to argue that's what all games do, but *Splinter Cell* enables you to attain this regardless of any obstacle that stands in your way. Acting almost as a combo, Fisher can seamlessly shoot a handful of adversaries in full flight – supported with customary slow-motion – stab a man in the neck, slide over a car bonnet, and use another individual as a human shield in order to pump another bullet into a distant threat before finishing off his make-shift safeguard. Resembling what could almost be seen as a violent ballet, the fluidity and sheer effortless nature of the technique means it has the potential to be worryingly satisfying when performed to perfection.

This isn't just about the evolution, or at least shift, when it comes to the core game, though. In order to match what's happening at its foundations, Ubisoft has decided to move Fisher himself into new territory as well. Aside from legendary head-burster and gravel-gargler Michael Ironside being displaced in favour of *Alcatraz* star Eric Johnson, secretive intelligence agency Third Echelon has been closed, with the newly formed (and intelligently named) Fourth Echelon taking its place. Rather than being under other people's orders, however, Sam is now in charge, given the rather daunting task of tracking down 'The Blacklist', which contains numerous terrorist plots waiting to take place on US soil. Those thinking this is all starting to sound more like *24* than *Splinter Cell* aren't too far off.

/// Ubisoft, on the other hand, seems to view it more as an amalgamation of everything it's doing right elsewhere. There are certainly elements from the likes of *Ghost Recon* in the way Fisher can survey the scene with X-ray vision, or the manner in which he does away with human obstacles, while the ability to now scurry up cliff faces and buildings puts him in touch with his spiritual *Assassin's Creed* and *Prince Of Persia* brothers. What made *Splinter Cell* such a success in the first place, though, is still very much apparent. Stealth remains in *Blacklist*'s DNA, opening up plenty of opportunity to sneak around in the same vein as usual.

It wouldn't be a sequel without a few eyebrow-raising inserts, however, and on this occasion they come in the form of Kinect. Rather than rely on nothing more than empty cans or a well-placed rock, guards can now be distracted using your actual voice. Although we're sure the words, 'Hey... you!' won't be mandatory, it's questionable if such an addition actually adds to the experience. It does mean those with louder households may have to ignore the feature altogether...

Blacklist is certainly a controversial path for Ubisoft to take, completely rewriting some of the fundamental principles that have been built up over the years. Currently, though, it's hard to argue it's a poor move – the Toronto studio's vision oozes style, and *Blacklist* looks to be one of the slickest games in recent memory. Finding a balance between old and new is going to be no easy task, but it could be just the breath of fresh air *Splinter Cell* has been waiting for.

> "Innovates from the roots of the franchise, and players can enjoy a series of twists on franchise favourites"
> PRESS RELEASE UBISOFT

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Toronto
Release: Spring 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Jade Raymond Profile

Made famous thanks to her involvement as a producer on *Assassin's Creed*, Jade Raymond now finds herself as managing director of Ubisoft's Toronto's studio. With stints at Sony and at EA working on *The Sims Online*, *Splinter Cell* is the latest project she hopes to light a spark under.

Jade Raymond History

Assassin's Creed **2007 [Multi]**
There **2003 [Multi]**
The Sims Online **2002 [PC]**
Trivial Pursuit **1998 [PC]**

High Point

Assassin's Creed II, where Raymond served as an executive producer, took the series and delivered on the promises that the first only ever hinted at.





■ Right: Sam Fisher looks a bit younger than when we last saw him. We assume Ubisoft has taken the decision to revamp its leading man.



ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE

SPLINTER CELL HAS never shied away from encouraging the player to abuse the environment, and *Blacklist* is surely looking to expand on that. Along with his usual array of technology, Fisher can stun guards by intelligently deploying an electric charge into a puddle – make sure their foot is in it first – or, in a far more bold move, call in an air strike to wipe out an entire platoon. The perks of being in charge of your own secret government agency… It's clearly Ubisoft's reaction to the current gaming industry, and a demonstration of the company trying to offer a little something for everyone.

Above: Although it may be slightly dismissive, Ubisoft does seem to have lifted a few environments from *Assassin's Creed* and dropped them into *Blacklist*. Left: To ensure it remains in the universe millions of people have become accustomed to, many elements have returned to *Blacklist*, not least the seamless mission objectives and locations. *Splinter Cell* will remain classy.









The Cave

CONCEPT An adventure in which players select three characters from a pool of seven. Sound familiar? It should; *The Cave* comes from Ron Gilbert, creator of *Maniac Mansion*.

Monkey Island co-creator Ron Gilbert details his spiritual successor to Maniac Mansion



Below: In the story of *The Cave*, the seven characters are drawn to the cave for reasons they can't explain. Gilbert compares it to the plot of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: US
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Double Fine
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

When Tim Schafer left LucasArts to found Double Fine, hopes were high that he could produce new works equally as creative and accomplished as *Day Of The Tentacle* or *Grim Fandango*. Early fumbles *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* came close but it's only with the developer's explosive outpouring of download games that it has become an influential force in the industry.

Developer History

Happy Action Theater **2012 [360]**
Kinect Sesame Street **2011 [360]**
Iron Brigade **2011 [Multi]**
Stacking **2011 [Multi]**
Costume Quest **2011 [Multi]**

High Point

Original, creative and fun, *Stacking* is easily Double Fine's greatest download game. For now...

Last year, Double Fine announced that Ron Gilbert would join the company, reuniting him with his *The Secret Of Monkey Island* co-creator Tim Schafer to work on a top-secret adventure game project. Now that game has finally been revealed. And while it may look a lot like a platformer on the surface, *The Cave* is actually an adventure game. Featuring three playable characters –each with a distinct skill – selected from a pool of seven, it follows a concept not entirely unlike Gilbert's 1987 genre-defining adventure *Maniac Mansion*. Here, Ron Gilbert talks exclusively to **games™** about the designer's long-awaited return to the genre that made him famous.

At Game Developers Conference last year you talked about the design difficulties of using multiple characters in *Maniac Mansion*. Why go through that pain again with *The Cave*?

Yeah, it is still a concern. And it's interesting, because when I was writing that *Maniac Mansion* talk, I was in the midst of designing *The Cave*, so thinking about what a mess that was for us in *Maniac Mansion* was really heavy on my mind. When Gary Winnick and I did *Maniac Mansion*, we hadn't really thought out the seven characters and the fact that they do different things. We were just kind of fumbling as we were going. But at least with *The Cave* I knew up front that I had these seven characters, I wanted each one to have some kind of a special skill... but the skills aren't a huge, major part of the game. Just because a character like the Hillbilly can swim indefinitely and hold his breath, that doesn't completely change the game for you because you have him. I look at abilities as this nice frosting that sits on top of the cake, rather than the cake itself.

"One of the main design goals of The Cave was to get rid of some of the monotony of adventure games"
RON GILBERT DOUBLE FINE

So you might solve the puzzle differently but it's not going to change the story?

Every character in *The Cave* has special areas of the cave that are themed to their stories. And you can't really get into those areas unless you have those characters, so if you do play it with the Hillbilly on one playthrough, and you play with the Knight on the second playthrough, you are going to see these whole other areas of the cave you'd never seen before because you have the Knight. So the cave does change quite a bit.

Adventure games traditionally have little replay value. Were you trying to counter that?

Well, they should be able to play it at least two or three times. It's not like an RPG where people are going to be playing *The Cave* for years, grinding through all the stuff. But that is a complaint of adventure games; they are primarily just these stories that get told, they're kind of like movies. Yeah, you may rewatch the movie a couple years later, but you don't watch the same movie over and over and over again, unless you're five. So yeah, adventure games have that problem. But something like *Maniac Mansion* I think helped that a little bit, because you could play and go, 'Well, what's Bernard's ending?' because he could do something a little bit differently.

How are you solving that replay value problem this time with *The Cave*?

I think with *The Cave* you get that same thing; you play it once, you had a great time – of course you had a great time! – so then you go, 'I'm going to play it again, and maybe I'm going to take the Scientist with me the second time because I really liked her, I really liked her area of the cave, but I'm going to take two new people.' So there are these two new, very different areas that you get to explore on your second playthrough.

Can you give an example of the type of thing you do in the cave?

There's something I showed in the demo, where there's this monster you meet in the cave, and he's blocking the exit to go down further, and you need to be able to grab him with this claw machine but he's nowhere near the claw machine at the moment. But there's a vending machine that vends hot dogs that you find, and you can get hot dogs out of the machine and lure him over to the claw. But the vending machine's broken, so you have to then go figure out, 'How do I get power back to the machine so I can go get a hot dog?' So it's that kind of multi-levelled adventure game puzzle. 

■ Below: Many people have mislabelled *The Cave* as a platform game, says Gilbert. He puts the mistake down to the way *The Cave* bucks many of the trends of the adventure genre.

THE POINT OF CLICK

THE CAVE is heading to both consoles and PC in digital form, but that doesn't mean that each version will play the same. The console edition, Gilbert tells us, will feature direct control so that each character can be moved around the cave with a control pad, but the PC version will be a little less direct. "We're still iterating on the PC interface," he explains. "I'm a PC gamer, I don't really play console games a lot, so the whole PC interface of the game is super important to me, that it feels really good and doesn't feel like a port from a console. So that's something we're spending a lot of time on; making sure that's very mouse driven, you don't feel like you're playing a console game with the keyboard."



Below: The 3D capabilities of the 3DS have been put to good use, with the papercraft environment unfolding outwards, items peeling into the player's gaze and scenery popping out of the screen.



Paper Mario: Sticker Star

CONCEPT Mario's latest 3D outing sees him returning to the papercraft visual style and hunting down rare stickers that endow him with new powers.

Is the latest Paper Mario the most inventive entry in the series to date?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Intelligent Systems
Release: Winter 2012
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Intelligent Systems began life as Nintendo's R&D1 team, led by Gunpei Yokoi, and (with the help of Shigeru Miyamoto) created *Donkey Kong* and *Radarscope*. Intelligent Systems was later formed as Nintendo entered the console marketplace, developing some inventive hits, including *Fire Emblem*, *Famicom Wars* and *Paper Mario*.

Developer History

Pullblox
2011 [3DS]

Paper Mario
2000 [N64]

Fire Emblem
1990 [NES]

Golf
1989 [Game Boy]

High Point

A quasi-sequel to *Super Mario RPG*, *Paper Mario* reinvented the plucky plumber as a colourful and accessible RPG star.

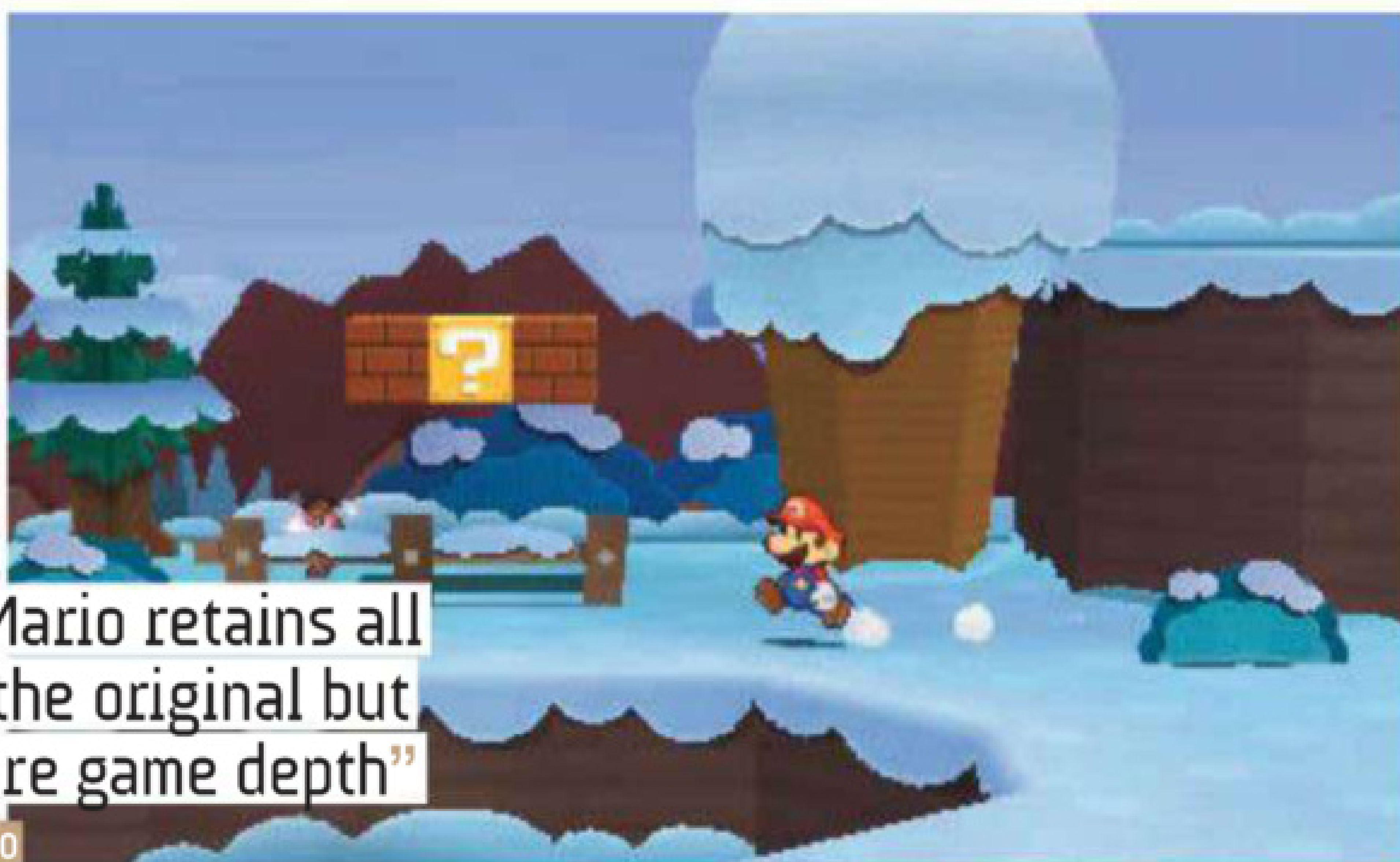
It's well known that Nintendo isn't one for deviating from the established template. Link will always silently adventure across the land of Hyrule, Samus Aran will forever blast aliens into the cold vacuum of space and Mario will rescue Princess Peach from the clutches of Bowser ad infinitum. But while these conventions remain comfortably rigid, the *Paper Mario* franchise has relished in jovially bending tropes and casting a self-referential glance towards Nintendo's primary mascot. So when it was revealed that *Paper Mario: Sticker Star* was ditching the damsel in distress routine in favour of pursuing Bowser for six Royal Stickers scattered across the Mushroom Kingdom, it was obvious there was more to this switcheroo than meets the eye.

Fusing together the crack-like compulsion that fuels any game firmly rooted in collectable items with classic RPG tropes, *Sticker Star* differs from previous *Paper Mario* entries purely on the gameplay opportunities each sticker presents the player. Similar to how badges functioned in previous titles, the major difference here is that stickers are a one-use deal that can be used in a range of combat scenarios and the overworld. For the former, different stickers unlock new abilities and can be stacked to unleash furious moves on enemies in turn-based combat encounters. Boot stickers will enable Mario to stomp on multiple Goombas at a time, a hammer will flatten a bunch of Koopas instantly, and discovering a fan will blow a throng of paper enemies into the horizon.

Below: On the bottom screen, players can pick stickers to be stacked in combat. New stickers can be created and used, but Nintendo is yet to explain how.

It's an incredibly simple mechanic to grasp, offering a wealth of depth as you strategically decide on the best sticker to use in any given situation and hoard to your heart's content. While stickers peeled off the shoebox-diorama environment will primarily be used as battle commands in turn-based combat scenarios, they can also be used to interact with the world. So while a fan sticker can be used to scatter a few enemies in combat, in the overworld it has a more potent effect, brushing aside masses of scenery, and unveiling new routes to take and quest items to help with Mario's mission. The stickers themselves can be plucked from walls, bought in a shop or even designed by the player and stored in your notebook to use later.

So while it won't massively change the flow from previous *Paper Mario* outings, the added layer of strategy and the buzz of collecting items is in many ways representative of what Nintendo does has been doing best for decades. Mario's first 2D adventure in 3D (not confusing!) doesn't shuck convention completely, but there's a welcome twist to the formula that we can't wait to get stuck into.



"This Paper Mario retains all of the fun of the original but with even more game depth"
SCOTT MOFFITT NINTENDO

Below: Gabriel's transformation has given MercurySteam the opportunity to up the ante on the combat. His new supernatural abilities promise to have a big impact on the combo systems with his weapons.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Spain
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in Madrid by former members of Rebel Act Studios, MercurySteam seemingly specialises in games made in collaboration with high-profile producers. American McGee, Clive Barker and Hideo Kojima have all worked on MercurySteam games, with the latter taking the studio to new heights with the excellent *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*.

Developer History

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow **2010 [Multi]**
Clive Barker's Jericho **2007 [Multi]**
American McGee presents: Scrapland **2004 [Multi]**

High Point

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow didn't just breathe new life into a series that had been floundering somewhat since the onset of 3D graphics; it was one of the most artistically rich games ever made.

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

CONCEPT The sequel to MercurySteam's surprisingly brilliant reimagining of the *Castlevania* brand. Gabriel Belmont is now Dracul and is going up against Satan for a second time.

Everybody wants to be the bad guy

If you've played both DLC chapters of *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* then you'll know that Gabriel, now calling himself Dracul, and Zobek have some unfinished business to attend to, namely the return of Satan, who plans to enslave them both. So that's Dracula and his old friend the Lord of the Necromancers versus Satan, basically. What's better than a battle between good and evil? A battle between evil, more evil and even eviller!

Dracul – he hates it when you call him Gabriel – in *Lords Of Shadow 2* looks a lot less grey and haggard than he did in the *Resurrection* DLC's epilogue, which was set in a modern-day city, in case you didn't know. He's scrubbed up a bit, got himself a nice fancy red cloak, and is generally looking pretty cool and vampy. And, from a certain angle, a bit like The Undertaker.

He doesn't appear to be hanging out in the present day though. The surrounding architecture and armour worn by the soldiers thrashing it out on the big, blood-soaked battlefield Dracul wanders onto would suggest we're back in medieval times, which is good really. We wouldn't want to play an urban, contemporary *Castlevania*. There are very few castles in modern city centres for a start. And if you did find one it'd have a gift shop in it and that would spoil the atmosphere. Anyway, it's good to know this is still a supernatural, Gothic adventure and not a fish-out-of-water comedy.

The aim, it turns out, is to really give players a handle on Dracula, who for far too long, MercurySteam believes, has simply been the rather pantomimic 'evil boss' of the *Castlevania* games. *LOS2* is promising a real glimpse into the dark heart of the Belmonts' nemesis, and to reveal just why that particular family comes to oppose him. By its end, while you may not agree with his choices – anything that eventually leads to you becoming a nasty master vampire dedicated to blood and death is kind of hard to get behind – we'll at least understand the chap.

> "We want to tell the story of Dracula; that's been the aim from the get-go"
> DAVE COX KONAMI

But it won't all just be all about connecting to our misguided bad guy. *Lords Of Shadow 2* will also sport more adventurous and atmospheric open-world level design, with plenty of opportunities to explore promised. You'll be a serious ass kicker too, as the strategic elements of *LOS*' combat, with your new vampire abilities and even more secondary weapons, are being further developed. With a deeper combo system and clear paths of skill progression, *LOS2* won't just be a hack-and-slash button-masher, requiring real skill to master.

Despite the rumours, it wasn't clear that *Lords Of Shadow* would be getting a sequel, and the opportunity to slip into the pointy boots of the *Castlevania* franchise's classic bad guy looks promising. If MercurySteam can add the depth of story and gameplay it's hoping to on Gabriel's – whoops, we mean Dracul's – path to the dark side, fans could be in for a treat.



Above: A more open-world approach should make *LOS2* feel more natural, and suit its titanic (and clearly *Shadow Of The Colossus*-inspired) boss battles to a tee.



"We technically never announced a date, so it hasn't been delayed. Production is normal"
BRIAN BURLESON GEARBOX SOFTWARE

Aliens: Colonial Marines

■ Above: The Xenomorphs will intuitively try and flank the marines, using every inch of the environment and the suffocating darkness to stalk players until finding the opportune moment to deliver a deadly blow.

CONCEPT ■ A game about a bunch of muscle-minded marines versus a bunch of acid-bleeding aliens, which has been stuck on development hell-V426 for several years.

Gearbox on returning to the intensity of James Cameron's cinematic classic

Those phallic-headed Xenomorphs have had a hard time of it recently. Wallowing in the dregs of spin-off fiction, H.R. Giger's infamous creation has resorted to taking parts in increasingly tenuous crossover comics, been contorted into a hybrid monstrosity and has appeared in several middle-of-the-road game adaptations, defining a new low in the star beast's credibility.

Gearbox isn't ignorant to the waning appeal of the franchise. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is bold and brash in all the right places, but the developer understands the need for some brand reinvigoration rather than resting on nostalgia and recognition. To begin with, Gearbox had to replicate the tone of the original source material and shift focus onto the plight of one soldier, rather than emulate Rebellion's futile juggling of three middling campaigns.

"We learnt a lot of stuff from them," smiles Brian Burleson, senior producer at Gearbox. "Some based on how to make a good game and some ways how not to. Rebellion didn't kill it with the marines, but it's hard to make three very different games at once. And so they didn't focus a lot of time on the marines side of things, which is one of the advantages of working on *Aliens: Colonial Marines*."

/// One iota of design similarity shared with Rebellion's crossover caper is in the use of oppressive darkness to conceal the terrors crawling in the shadows, and the palpable tension when it is skilfully employed. Jumping behind the pulse rifle of Corporal Christopher Winter, an extended portion of our time with the game is set within the bowels of the U.S.S Sulaco, surveying the carnage Ripley and pals left in their wake. A brief glimpse of something shifting in the gloom does enough to unsettle, and tension rapidly transforms into exhilaration as a pack of acid-spewing Xenomorphs emerge through the rafters and a roaring gunfight commences.

To get to the heart of this inimitable series intensity, Gearbox returned right to the source for inspiration. "We sat down with Ridley Scott to shoot the shit about the franchise," says Burleson. "They talked about *Alien* and some of the original ideas behind it. Interestingly, this was years before *Prometheus* was greenlit, and it was really fascinating to gain an understanding of how big the mythology is – then a couple of years later he decided to make *Prometheus* and a lot of those things we talked about have come to fruition. That helped us in development significantly with an understanding of where to go in terms of the Xenomorphs."

If *Colonial Marines* fails to live up to expectations then it certainly won't be for a lack of careful consideration and understanding of the hallowed property. Gearbox's shooter certainly delivers authenticity and fan service in equal measure – it just remains to be seen whether the gameplay will be in service of the fiction, or will stand as a genuine reason to be excited about a new game set within the *Alien* universe.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii U, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: 12 February 2013
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

Gearbox spent its early years as a gun for hire. Working with Valve, it developed ports and expansions to for *Half-Life* but ventured into original IP with *Brothers In Arms*. It followed the shooter's success with *Borderlands*, as well as the dire *Duke Nukem Forever* and Samba *De Amigo* on Wii.

Developer History

Duke Nukem Forever **2011 [Multi]**
Borderlands **2010 [Multi]**
Samba De Amigo **2008 [Wii]**
Brothers In Arms: Road To Hill 30 **2005 [Multi]**

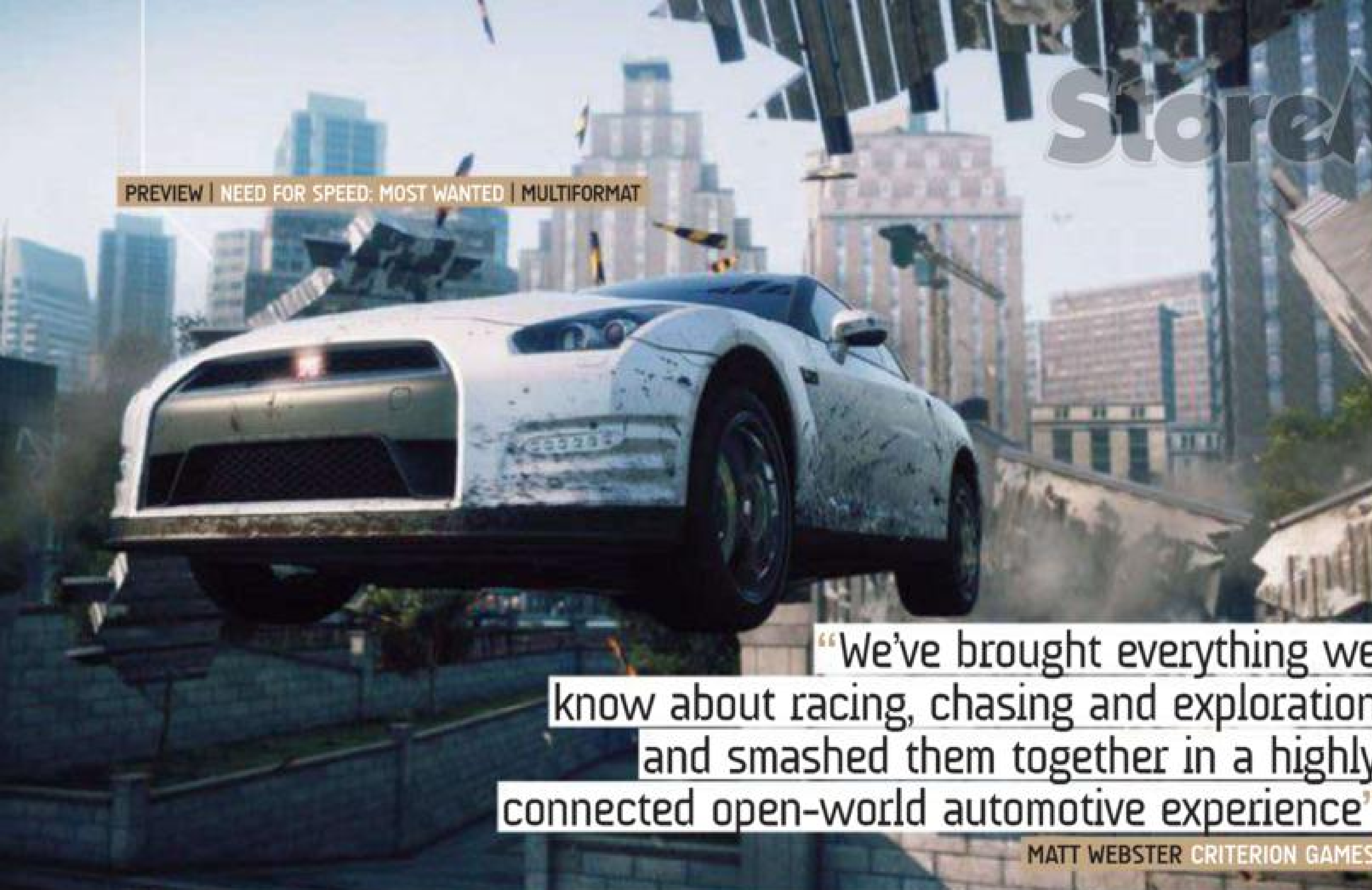
High Point

In co-op, *Borderlands* was compulsive fun.



■ Above: LV-426 is a bit of an eyesore, but Gearbox assures that there will be plenty of diversity in environments.





"We've brought everything we know about racing, chasing and exploration and smashed them together in a highly connected open-world automotive experience"
MATT WEBSTER CRITERION GAMES



Shaking the cops works in much like *GTA*, with players lying low until the wanted level disappears. You can also switch vehicles and get spray jobs to avert detection.

Need For Speed: Most Wanted

CONCEPT A reboot of the *Most Wanted* IP, the nineteenth entry in the *Need For Speed* franchise mixes an open-world environment with online competitiveness.

Criterion Games returns to the open-world racer

The last time Criterion Games utilised a vast open-world city as a backdrop for an arcade racer, the result was the irrefutable zenith of the *Burnout* franchise, *Burnout Paradise*. No surprise then that Criterion has used this genre benchmark as the basis for *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, having previously harkened back to the thumping chrome-on-chrome destructible mayhem of PlayStation 2-era *Burnout* titles with *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*.

Let's not forget that *Hot Pursuit* did the unthinkable back in 2010, successfully reviving EA's floundering brand from an increasingly stagnant and neon-lit *Fast And The Furious*-style crassness and injected it with a sense of urgency and competition that had been absent from the franchise for years – mostly due to the superb addition of Autolog. Expanding on the ideas previously introduced in *Hot Pursuit*, *Most Wanted* once again sees racers competing against one another while the fuzz intensely pursue. But instead of a linear set of checkpoints to throttle through, *Most Wanted* is set in the open world of Fairhaven City – a sprawling metropolis densely populated with events, ramps, shortcuts and hidden vehicles for players to freely discover.



Hot Pursuit's police AI has been significantly upgraded so that cops will doggedly chase you across a whole city.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PS Vita, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: EA
Developer: Criterion Games
Release: 2 November
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

For all its notable achievements after nearly two decades, Criterion Games has only really found major mainstream recognition with the *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* series of racing games. Nevertheless, having consistently produced a number of subversive genre titles, including *Sub Culture*, *Burnout* and *Black*, Criterion has never allowed success to impede its creativity.

Developer History

Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit **2010 [Multi]**
Burnout Paradise **2008 [Multi]**
Black **2006 [Multi]**
Burnout **2001 [Multi]**

High Point

Burnout Paradise was an epic open-world racing opus that remains one of the finest examples of the genre.

This new landscape introduces a non-linear aspect to the underground street races drivers participate in, as players are able to plot their own route as they move between checkpoints across the city. And it doesn't end with the race either; if you've got a police tail during a race, then they'll follow you after the finish line until you can gain enough distance to shake them.

Criterion is known for buoying its racers with an inclusive multiplayer experience, and *Most Wanted* is no different in that respect, offering another madcap online experience. Once again Autolog is the primary means to compete against friends online, brag about rankings and track stats and leaderboard positions – using Speed Points, which are accumulated through race wins, finding collectables and scoring takedowns, which contribute to your ranking among friends. Players use meet-up points to start a race, jostling for top placement and finding the most inventive routes and means to destroy competitors. It's after one race ends that another challenge appears on the map in the near vicinity, the scramble to get to the meet-up spot as heated as the race itself (the game doesn't wait for you to get into position for a race, so you could well end up facing the wrong direction as it commences).

It's an impressively energising and spontaneous structure, and we've only scratched the surface of Fairhaven City. It's fair to say that with another dizzying mix of arcade handling, cinematic thrills and inventive multiplayer, Criterion has once again rejuvenated the brand.

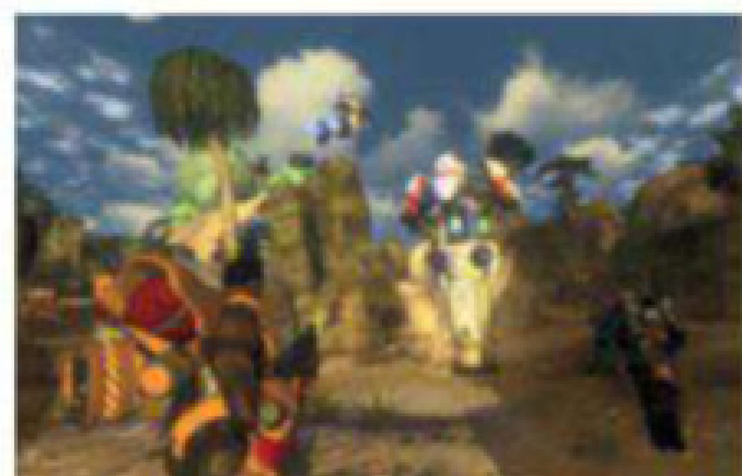


SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

FIREFALL

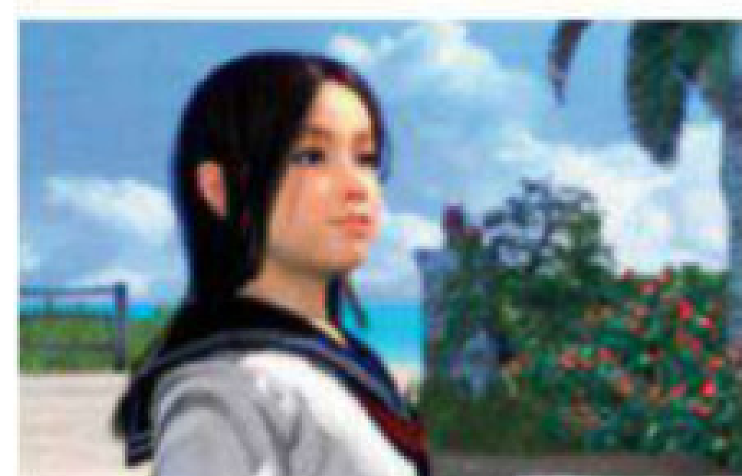
Format: PC
Publisher: Red 5 Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



RED 5 STUDIOS' ambitious massively multiplayer title is shaping up very promisingly indeed. It's a fast-paced hybrid MMO/shooter that will use staged content, with towns, dungeons and other areas only unlocked by player achievement. It's an approach quite unlike any other MMO, but it could be what gives *Firefall* a deeper sense of community as players really feel in control of their world.

YAKUZA 5

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: In-house
ETA: November



IT'S TAKEN a little longer than usual in development, but it looks like we'll be getting another chance to wander through even more intricately realised Japanese streets in *Yakuza 5*. The latest game in the series will feature five Japanese cities – Tokyo, Sapporo, Nagoya, Osaka and Fukuoka – each with its own protagonist to play. We might not get a Western localisation any time soon, but we live in hope.

PROJECT X ZONE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Monolith Software
ETA: September



WE'VE HAD more than a few big crossover games in the last couple of years, but it's hard not to be excited about *Project X Zone* on 3DS. The way it will throw notable characters from Sega, Capcom and Namco Bandai franchises together into RPG-driven turn-based battle looks to be doing more than just satisfying fan service, with gameplay that could make it one of the most addictive titles on the 3DS.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DEVIL SUMMONER SOUL HACKERS

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: In-house
ETA: August



SHIN MEGAMI Tensi spin-off *Devil Summoner Soul Hackers* was an old favourite on the Saturn and Playstation, and it's getting the port treatment onto 3DS with full voice and visual upgrades. Fans will be especially pleased to learn that as well as polishing its trademark RPG play Atlus has co-opted *Macross Frontier* animation studio Satelight to produce its over-the-top anime cut-scenes.

SOL TRIGGER

Format: PSP
Publisher: Imageepoch
Developer: In-house
ETA: October



IMAGEEPOCH IS rolling out the red carpet for *Sol Trigger*, which it says will be the final game in the series released on PSP. As well as making it look lavish, the developer is adding new dimensions to its battle system, with players sacrificing parts of their characters to infuse weapons or bolster an attack with Sol power, which introduces some real risk/reward mechanics that spice up play.

COMPANY OF HEROES 2

Format: PC
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Relic Entertainment
ETA: 2013



NO MATTER what THQ's problems, it has some of the most talented developers in the world in its stable. Relic Entertainment is one of them, and looks set to prove it again with *Company Of Heroes 2*. The military RTS will again push the genre with its attention to detail, as it refines RTS mechanics like facing, cover and environmental hazards on the harsh Soviet front in World War II.

DARK

Format: PC
Publisher: Kalypso Media
Developer: Real Forge
ETA: 2013



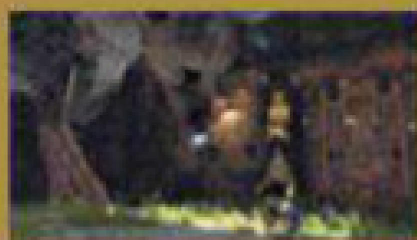
WHILE AT first glance, *Dark* appears to simply be a first-person RPG in a horror setting, it'll actually cast players as a do-gooding vampire. With gameplay focusing on stealth, players will use their special vampire abilities in a battle against the evil GeoForge Corporation and uncover its nefarious plans. This could be an interesting one if some of the vampire/stealth ideas we've seen really come together.

NEPTUNE V

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Idea Factory
Developer: Compile Heart
ETA: August

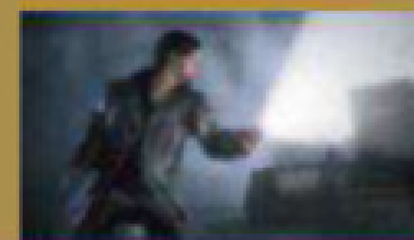


AH JAPAN, you grace us with some of the kookiest games ever! Idea Factory has announced that *Neptune V*, the next entrance of the crazy *Super God Dimensional* series, is due out later this year, and you can expect the usual shenanigans from the cult JRPG, which is famous for containing guest appearances from various Japanese developers as playable characters. We can't wait to see who's next...



E3 NO-SHOW – The Last Guardian (PS3)

Anyone hoping for a look at Team Ico's dog-chicken-monster vapourware adventure has a longer wait ahead of them. Studio head Shuhei Yoshida blamed "technical difficulties" for the game's absence.



E3 NO-SHOW – Alan Wake 2 (X360)

Despite being teased by Remedy's Sam Lake on Twitter just days before the show began, there was no evidence of the supernatural hack's next American nightmare during Microsoft's E3 conference. Shame.

GUILD 02

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Level-5**
Developer: **Multi**
ETA: **2013**



GUILD 01 WAS the gaming equivalent of an anthology movie, and *Guild 02* is a similar offering, with four games from various directors. *Mushikera Sensha* is a miniature tank game by *Mega Man* creator Keiji Inafune; *Kaijuu Ga Deru Kinyoubi* is nostalgic monster-battling homage from Kazu Ayabe; and Kazuya Asano and Takemaru Abiko's *ALONE* is a closed environment puzzle game set in mysterious darkness.

DOKURO

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Gungho**
Developer: **Game Arts**
ETA: **July**



GAME ARTS' second Vita offering is looking like a real charmer, promising a clever combination of cutesy chalk-drawn picture-book aesthetics and a touch-driven character-swapping gameplay gimmick. There's certainly plenty of atmosphere here, and if its side-scrolling adventure gameplay can genuinely match its looks, *Dokuro* could be a real treat for PS Vita owners.

TALES OF....

Format: **TBC**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **September**



NAMCO BANDAI recently unveiled the next game in its *Tales* series. The as yet-to-be-fully-titled game is a 'mothership title', just like *Xillia*, *Vesperia* and *Graces*, so it will be set in its own modern (rather than fantasy-inspired) universe, and establish its own continuity. That's an exciting prospect given the lavish attention the now in-house team at Namco Bandai has always given each instalment.

TORKIO GOURMET SURVIVAL 2

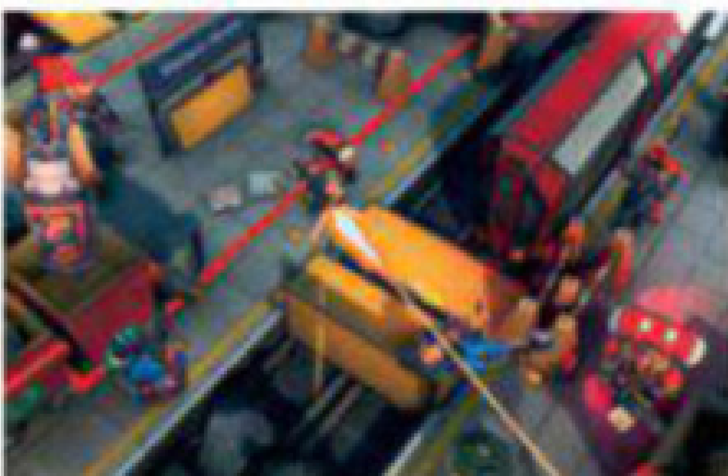
Format: **PSP**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **Natsume**
ETA: **July**



ACCORDING TO Namco Bandai, its gourmet hunter hero Torkio is set to return later this year, bringing with him his own particular brand of *Monster Hunter*-inspired brand of play with him as he searches for the perfect meal. As ever, *Toriko 2* will have a far more beat-'em-up-inspired slant than *Monster Hunter*, with beast bosses to battle and more than a hundred stages to clear.

RAD SOLDIERS

Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **War Chest**
Developer: **Splash Damage**
ETA: **July**



SPLASH DAMAGE has a solid reputation in the FPS multiplayer shooter space, but its recently announced IOS game is actually a turn-based, free-to-play affair. It promises to bring the same sense of multiplayer flair to the genre that it has to the FPS, but most excitingly it will be playable across all iOS platforms with players going head-to-head on whichever device they prefer.

BULLET RUN

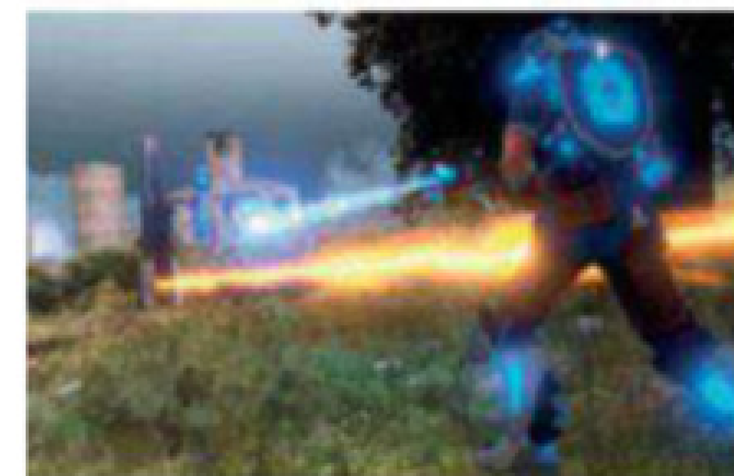
Format: **Online**
Publisher: **Sony Online Entertainment**
Developer: **ACONY Games**
ETA: **August**



FREE-TO-PLAY PC shooters seem to be very much flavour of the month right now, but we've plenty of reasons to be hopeful that SOE's next PC offering could be a little different. It's a team-based FPS that puts players in deadly near-future *Running Man*-style reality TV show. But merely taking out opponents won't be enough – you'll have to do it with style using unique and painful-looking Kill Skill attacks.

SHOOTMANIA STORM

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Ubiosoft**
Developer: **Nadeo**
ETA: **September**



WE'LL ADMIT that we scratched our heads more than a bit when Nadeo, the developer famous for the *TrackMania* racing games, announced that it was creating a shooter, but the results are looking surprisingly enticing. As well as some frantically paced FPS action, it'll come with a fantastic-looking tool set with which players in the community will be able to create their own shooter arenas.

LITTLEBIGPLANET

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Media Molecule**
ETA: **July**



THE VITA looks like an ideal platform for the *LBP* franchise. Not only does the handheld version have all the gameplay elements of the PS3 version, but it also features additions that exploit the Vita's touch and motion-sensitive features, like the ability to manipulate objects in the world and in-game menus. We hate to get all touchy-feely, but this one has us excited.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

FAR CRY 3

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
ETA: September



FAR CRY has always tried to push the boundaries of what first-person games can or should do, but the third instalment is taking it even further. As well as depicting painted naked ladies, full-blown sex and bodily self-harm with no real sense of shame, Ubisoft is pushing what's possible within a first-person shooter by not being hamfisted about it. Driving, exploring, fighting tigers – it's all here.

TOMB RAIDER

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
ETA: Spring 2013



DESPITE BEING delayed till 2013, every new tidbit adds makes the *Tomb Raider* revamp a bit more exciting. Essentially the *Uncharted* 'roller coaster', poor Lara seems destined to be hurled down waterfalls, attacked by wild animals and smacked around by a group who aren't particularly keen on Ms Croft staying alive. With a fantastic engine, this could be the finest *Tomb Raider* yet.

FORZA HORIZON

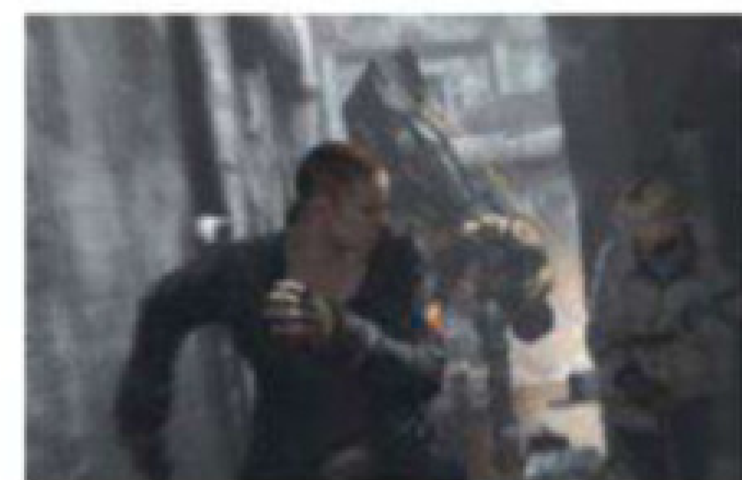
Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Turn10/Playground Games
ETA: 23 October



FORZA'S FIRST step into open-world territory continues to look more impressive. Set in Colorado, it's everything that has made *Forza* such a success over years, finished off with endless roads, a day/night cycle and the ability to stray off the beaten path. With the focal point of the 'Horizon Festival' adding logic to the unrestricted madness, Turn10 may have found a way to splinter its franchise with style.

RESIDENT EVIL 6

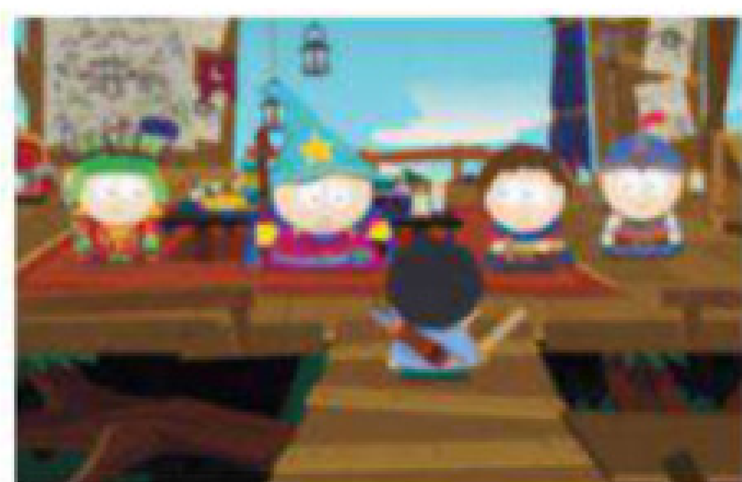
Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2 October



FINALLY BROUGHT to life thanks to a real-time demo, Capcom shocked the world by showing Leon Kennedy moving *and* shooting. He can even hurl himself onto the floor and fire a ton of bullets at a helicopter, should you so wish. The real question is why the developer ever decided to insinuate that Kennedy's gameplay would be 'traditional' *Resi*. Chris Redfield would be hard pushed to find more action.

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

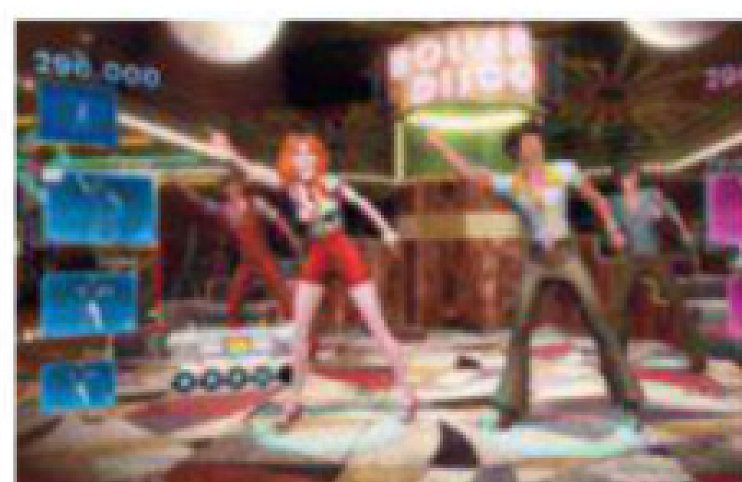
Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
ETA: March 2013



TREY PARKER and Matt Stone won last month's E3 by taking a swipe at SmartGlass mere minutes after it had been announced, and continued such success with yet more insight into the upcoming *South Park* game. Moved back into early next year to ensure it reaches the necessary heights, Obsidian, in conjunction with the duo, really does seem to be capturing what has made the TV show so popular.

DANCE CENTRAL 3

Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Harmonix
ETA: TBA 2012



ALTHOUGH USHER tried his hardest to ruin Harmonx's new rhythm-action announcement at E3, *Dance Central* continues to be one of Kinect's saving graces. Focusing far more on multiplayer fun than teaching you how to shake your stuff like a pro in your living room, you can look forward to shaking your hips to the likes of E.U., Gloria Gaynor, 50 Cent and many more later this year.

DEAD ISLAND : RIPTIDE

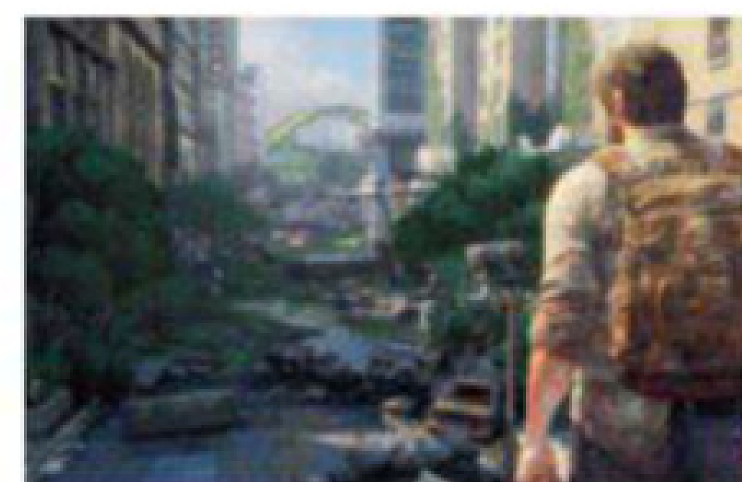
Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Techland
ETA: TBA



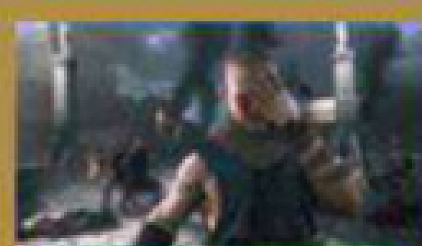
ALMOST SNUCK out, with nothing more than a logo, the key thing to note here is that *Riptide* is most certainly a new game within the *Dead Island* universe. Unfortunately, for now that's all Deep Silver is willing to tell anyone, aside from the fact that, in America at least, it will cheap. Confirmed at $49.99, the company was keen to put the lowered price down to us all reaching the end of the current console cycle.

THE LAST OF US

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Naughty Dog
ETA: TBA



GONE ARE the quick-witted charming ways of Nathan Drake, and in his place is the hard-hitting, gruesome Joel. *Uncharted*'s influence is plastered all over *The Last Of Us* but the shift in direction is a clear attempt by the developer to separate the two as much as possible. The AI-controlled Ellie will be the real test, though, along with the somewhat daring decision to revert to health packs.



E3 NO-SHOW – Ryse (Xbox Kinect)

Announced two years ago and not heard of since, Crytek is still promising more on *Ryse* in the coming months. If true, that means it could be free-to-play, given the developer's recent comments.

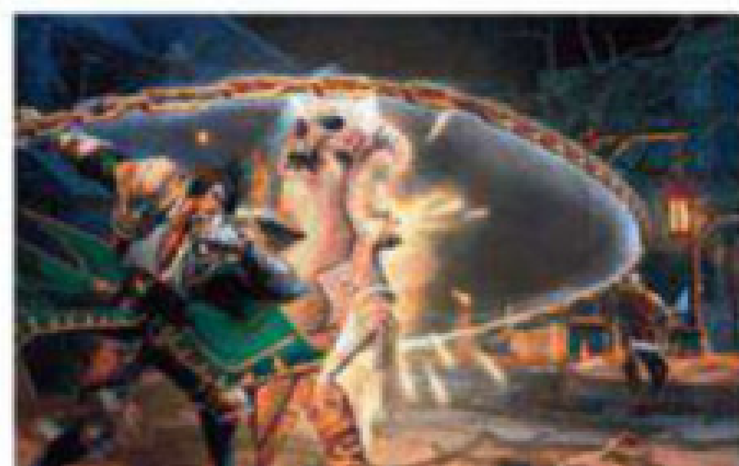


E3 NO-SHOW – Rainbow 6: Patriots (Multi)

Ubisoft had already made a pretty big deal about this when it was unveiled late last year, so its no-show at E3 was a little strange, especially when announcing new IP such as *Watch Dogs*.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE

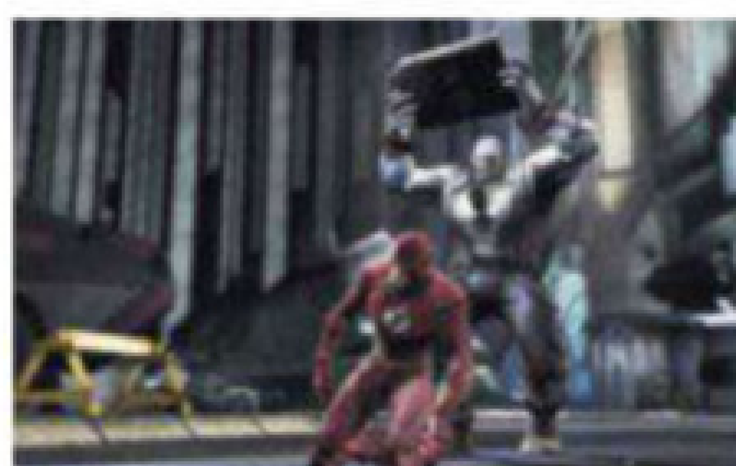
Format: **Nintendo 3DS**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **MercurySteam**
ETA: **TBA**



TO LET the gaming world know the franchise is most definitely back, *Castlevania* is also heading to the 3DS. Following the trend of boasting 2D gameplay in 3D environments, Trevor and Simon Belmont, as well as Alucard, and one other unrevealed character will be playable at different points throughout history. For hardcore fans, its climax will also lead directly into the events of *Lord Of Shadows 2*.

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

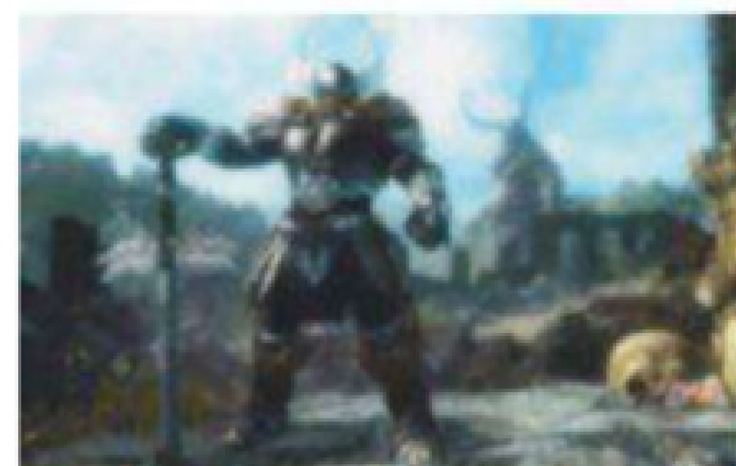
Format: **Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii U**
Publisher: **Warner Bros.**
Developer: **NetherRealm**
ETA: **TBA 2013**



CONSIDERING *MORTAL Kombat Vs. DC Universe* wasn't very well received, it's surprising NetherRealm has been allowed a second go at the DC stable. This time, however, the absence of Scorpion et al. should mean the watered down violence doesn't upset as many as it did last time. Featuring Batman, Flash and Superman, among others, Ed Boon has promised to push it as far as he's allowed to.

ASCEND: NEW GODS

Format: **Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Signal Studios**
ETA: **TBA**



WHILE EASILY ignored, Signal Studios' new game is a pivotal moment in the Xbox's history as it'll be the first to genuinely offer a free-to-play experience on the console. The latest from the minds who created *Toy Soldiers*, its generic third-person fantasy setting is certainly being spiced up – sacrificing your own character will lead to greater rewards, while the game will also support SmartGlass.

TOKYO JUNGLE

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **PlayStation C.A.M.P/Crispy's**
ETA: **TBA**



CONFIRMED FOR a European and North American release at this year's E3, this absolutely bizarre PSN game is certainly not what you'd expect to ever find on any Western download service. A survival-horror of sorts, the twist comes in the fact that the human race has been wiped off planet Earth and animals now rule. You pick a species and then try to, stealthily, stay alive. Absolute madness.

WONDERBOOK

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA**



ASIDE FROM being an interactive book made possible thanks to QR codes, PS Move and the PlayStation Eye, Sony has done a good job in making *Wonderbook* seem far more complicated than was necessary. While the first focuses on the *Harry Potter* franchise, named *Book Of Spells* – meaning it'll find an audience pretty easily – more clarification would surely be appreciated.

SOUL SACRIFICE

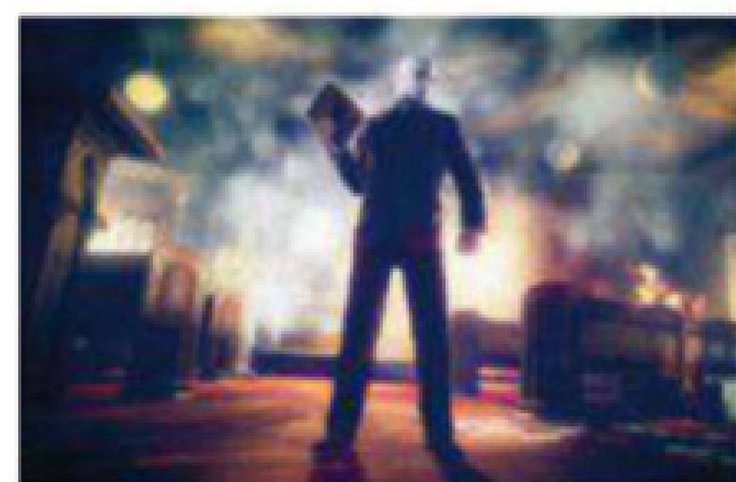
Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **SCE Japan Studio**
ETA: **TBA**



GIVEN THE ridiculous success of *Monster Hunter* in the East, it's hardly surprising that many other games rise up from the ashes in a similar guise. *Soul Sacrifice* is such a title. With a much darker tone, and headed by one Keiji '*Mega Man*' Inafune, Sony has officially announced its anticipated release in Western territories sometime next year. Now let's see it try and compete…

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

Format: **Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **IO Interactive**
ETA: **20 November**



ANOTHER MONTH, another very impressive *Hitman: Absolution* demo that proves IO's vision is far from the scuppered mess many predicted earlier this year. Balancing individual styles with what seems like ease, the only real pitfalls *Absolution* is facing in its build up to launch are ill-advised trailers that spark community backlash. Less nuns, more guns… or something far less awful.

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM – DAWNGUARD

Format: **Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC**
Publisher: **Bethesda**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **30 September**



AFTER TEASING it for what seemed like 45 years, Bethesda finally announced that *Dawnguard* would be the first premium DLC for the multi-million selling *Skyrim*. Lasting between 10-20 hours and coming in, on the 360 at least, at 1,600 Microsoft Points, it follows a group of warriors who dedicate their lives to hunting down vampires. If you love *Skyrim*, you'll love this, obviously.

THE FUTURE IS UNREAL



AS THE LIGHT SLOWLY GOES OUT FOR WHAT HAS BEEN THE LONGEST HARDWARE CYCLE IN RECENT MEMORY, EPIC GAMES' ANNOUNCEMENT REGARDING ITS UNREAL ENGINE 4 HINTS AT WHAT'S NEXT FOR VIDEOGAMERS WHEN THE NEW GENERATION FINALLY ARRIVES. FROM GEARS OF WAR TO INFINITY BLADE, **GAMES™** SAT DOWN WITH THE DEVELOPER TO SEE JUST WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

I think the truth is that sometimes the technical limitations are crucial to the success of design. Without limits to push against, I think something would be lost, such as a sense of satisfaction for pulling off something that you may not have thought possible." From the mouth of senior technical artist and level designer at Epic Games, Alan Willard, you'd be forgiven for questioning such a statement given the recent reveal of the studio's latest piece of technology, Unreal Engine 4. Designed to showcase Epic's vision for the future and in which direction it wants the next-generation of games to head, it's a leap that will affect the entire industry – there's a reason the developer's last piece of middleware is used constantly regardless of genre or team.

With the reveal of its new baby, though, Epic is setting a precedent for everyone

else to follow. In the absence of the Xbox 720 or PlayStation 4, the *Gears Of War* studio is highlighting where it believes the medium needs to go if it's to evolve the way many are expecting it to. "Every major jump forward in technology, whether it's related to software or hardware, opens new doors when it comes to the engine and our games," Willard continues. "Even the improvement in Unreal Engine 3 since *Gears Of War* was released is substantial, and the enhancements became more obvious in the later games. Everything from dramatic improvements in post-processing (depth of field, motion blur, colour correction, et cetera) to advances in how we render our environments (global illumination using Unreal Lightmass, more powerful animation system, Unreal Landscape and foliage) has an impact on the final look of the games. Epic's team is always personally striving to become the best in their fields, and I think that shows in our work [and will continue to show with what we do next]."

It shows confidence and a brash attitude from Epic, backed up by its repeated stance that it is "responsible" for making sure that both Microsoft and Sony understand what they need to deliver. The North Carolina company did the same just months before the Xbox 360 was showcased, convincing the team slaving away to up the RAM to 500mb in order to run the jaw-droppingly impressive *Gears Of War*. Despite seven years having passed since that fateful day, Epic has seen no reason to change tack, with Cliff Bleszinski outwardly saying that it is on the company's shoulders to steer the future of the business to where Epic both wants and thinks it needs to go.

Aside from the images that adorn these pages and a trailer that continues to wow the world, the latest Unreal's strength comes in numbers and statistics direct from the developer that will be lost on many. It can now process twice as many objects in a scene; visual effects such as smoke, sparks, bubbles and water spray no longer detract from game performance; it supports refraction, meaning any object viewed through glass or water refracts realistically. These elements may escape many a gamer's attention, simply winning them over by how much better everything looks, but from a development aspect it is, by the creators' own admission, a game changer.

Epic has never been shy about making its tools available to the wider community and, with this in mind, as well as the popularity the engine will no doubt attract, it's now possible to create a game using the engine without even touching a line of code. Tasks that are usually handled by programmers are no longer necessary, meaning designers can implement their vision however they see fit. As has become habit for the developer, it will be a specific game, much like the original *Gears*, that shows off what this technology is capable of, but there's far more to the Unreal Engine 4 than just being able to output visuals that make people stand up and take notice. As Willard says: "[When] we were developing Unreal Engine 3 in concert with the development of *Gears Of War*, a lot of the decisions we made in both the game and the engine were informed by the other's development. The *Gears Of War* game design and experience were strong enough to demonstrate and highlight the features on Unreal Engine 3 on its own merit, so we never felt forced to shoehorn features just to show off the technology. We certainly plan to make great games in the future that take full advantage of the same capabilities."

> "The improvement in Unreal Engine 3 since Gears Of War was released is substantial, and the enhancements became more obvious in the later games"

Before recently, it would have been fair to assume that Epic would've turned back to *Gears Of War* in order to sell its new engine. For all of *Unreal*

UNDER THE HOOD – COMPARING THE ENGINES

games™ investigates the latest innovations and the newest engines that are making waves in the industry

WHEN YOU THINK of a new engine, you think possibilities. You think graphics. You think gameplay opportunities. Ultimately, you think of the future. With a teasing glimpse at both Square Enix and Epic's latest engine technologies, gamers have been provided two equally impressive but distinctly different perspectives on exactly what we can expect over the course of the next couple of years. Unreal Engine 4 contains all the raw muscle and portentousness you'd come to expect from Epic, focusing the demo on elemental details. The bluster of snow through the imposing castle doors, the glow of oozing magma and the infinitesimal detail in stone, fabric and iron. Compared to LucasArts' pre-production footage of *Star Wars 1313* – running on Unreal Engine 3 – it shows just how far the technology has evolved.

***Star Wars 1313* is no slouch in the visual department, of course. An ambitious attempt at emulating its cinematic originator, LucasArts employed Hollywood talent Industrial Light & Magic, Lucasfilm Animation and Skywalker Sound to ensure it maintains a feature film quality. Clearly pushing Unreal Engine 3 to its limits, *1313* is pegged for a next-gen release due to the buffed animations, large-scale set-pieces and exquisite environmental detail. Similarly, Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* doesn't seem quite as technologically evolved as Unreal Engine 4, but is making ambitious strides in the genre within the current hardware generation.**

With Ubisoft Montreal's proprietary engine, *Watch Dogs* has players interacting and manipulating a large-scale open-world environment on the fly. Evidently it can't compete with *1313* or Unreal Engine 4 in terms of character and animation detail, but by crafting a persistent open-world environment wherein advanced technology can be used to interact with various facets of daily life (NPC mobile phones, traffic lights and electricity), it's a game of significant scope and depth that wouldn't be possible a couple of years ago. It's clear there is some trade-off with this approach: while *Star Wars 1313* can utilise the existing Unreal Engine 3 to focus on visual flourish within a linear, scripted game world, *Watch Dogs* has built a pervasive interactive environment at the expense of minute detail.

Square Enix has managed to combine the best of all these, with its real-time *Final Fantasy* Agni's Philosophy demo to showcase the new Luminous Engine. Evoking the sense of awe that the PSone-era *Final Fantasy* games used to effortlessly achieve in cut-scenes, Agni's Philosophy lingers on the detail of various characters, with neck ligaments, hair and facial expressions just a few areas highlighted. But much like the Unreal Engine 4 demo there's an imposing sense of scale, as winged dragons soar above the city skyline, a chase sequence promotes a lightning pace and smoky embers gracefully ignite the scene. If there's something to be learnt from all of the above, it's that we're entering a new era of game design where anything is seemingly possible.


UNREAL ENGINE 4
LUCASARTS
UBISOFT
SQUARE ENIX







EPIC SUCCESS

25 new games you never knew used Unreal Technology

- Gears Of War: Judgment
- **Infinity Blade: Dungeons**
- Aliens: Colonial Marines
- **Batman: Arkham City - Armored Edition**
- Borderlands 2
- **Core Blaze**
- Deadlight
- **Demon's Score**
- DmC: Devil May Cry
- **Dishonored**
- DUST 514
- **Eden to GREEEEN**
- Fable: The Journey
- **Hawken**
- Injustice: Gods Among Us
- **Lost Planet 3**
- Mass Effect 3 - Wii U
- **Papa & Yo**
- Quantum Conundrum
- **Ravaged**
- Rekoil
- **Star Wars 1313**
- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD
- **Transformers: Fall Of Cybertron**
- XCOM: Enemy Unknown








Tournament's success, no game has been more profitable for the company than the franchise which proudly advertises Marcus Fenix as its cover star, and showcasing a world millions are familiar with in a new light is a smart move. With franchise prequel *Gears Of War: Judgment* being announced for the current generation, Epic is letting the core team loose on Unreal Engine 4 as PeopleCanFly handle events this time around. The *Call Of Duty* model strikes again.

when the majority of studios embrace the future. Epic has been quick to quash such rumours, but given the Wii U's limited hardware compared to what has been showcased, it's hard to believe that the Unreal Engine 4 could ever run as it's been designed to on Nintendo's latest hardware.

With Epic admitting it has actively seen what Microsoft and Sony are planning and, once again, has urged both companies to push each console even

"When we were developing Unreal Engine 3 in concert with the development of GOW, a lot of the decisions we made were informed by the other's development"

It's not all positive, however, especially if your interest has been piqued by Nintendo's Wii U. Far more in line with what we've become accustomed to since the 360 and PS3 arrived, it seems highly likely that developers who want to use Unreal technology will have to stick with the third iteration – the tablet-focused device is just not powerful enough to run Unreal 4. This raises questions as far as the Wii U's line-up is concerned. While titles such as *Batman: Arkham City*, *Darksiders II* and *Assassin's Creed* have impressed so far, it doesn't bode well for Nintendo's long-term plan if it's genuinely thinking about not getting left behind

harder than they currently are, what's possible on the Unreal Engine 4 may end up being the playground for PC owners. More power means a greater cost for everyone involved, and while there's little argument that Mark Rein and co. are pioneers when it comes to this field, that doesn't necessarily mean the platform holders will follow suit. After all, there's a reason Epic has decided to start making so much noise a year before anyone expects an announcement about what the next generation will bring. Given the attention it has now received, though, surely nothing else will be acceptable…

WHEN GEARS OF WAR MEETS MINECRAFT

Epic broadens its development horizons with Fortnite



CONSIDERING ITS SUCCESS, it's almost bizarre that so few high-profile developers have copied *Minecraft*'s incredibly popular template, but Epic's much-shrouded-in-mystery *Fortnite* could be the first to attempt to fuse the gap. "The one that I'm totally hooked on is *Minecraft*. I mean, its one of those games that is super simple to learn but has a tremendous amount of depth on the backend," Cliff Bleszinski told games™. "I feel like the thing about *Minecraft* is that if it hadn't come about in the fully internet-connected era… let me phrase it better: one of the reasons that *Minecraft* became such a phenomenon was because of the fully connected era of message boards, YouTube and stuff like that. A game can ship and be obtuse in terms of how to learn it, but people just Google it and the community takes care of itself, whereas if that came and shipped without that community it would have been too hard to figure out everything. But when everyone learns how to make a hoe and pickaxe and it all starts to get shared then it can get to the cool stuff of making Helm's Deep and showing off that."

A clear inspiration, but since its very brief showing last year Epic seems reluctant to go into more details. Surely the ideas that have shot *Minecraft* to the top of the gaming stratosphere will all be prevalent in some manner, though, spurned forward by the addition of tower defence elements. What is almost a certainty is the day and night cycles, where the atmosphere intentionally shifts. When the sun is up you'll be granted the ability to craft and build as you see fit, the tension coming due to the constant overhanging goal of ensuring that when dusk falls you're protected against the enemy threat. With no showing at this year's E3, though, and a new *Gears* game on the way, it'll be interesting as to when more information and platforms, for *Fortnite* will be unveiled.

MAKING SOMETHING UNREAL

NATURALLY THE most interesting aspects to come out of this initial reveal of the Unreal Engine 4 are from a visual standpoint. To see it in action shows just how advanced Epic's technology now is. On that point, it's hard to actually notice the smaller details which are all merging together to create the leap forward. Complex reflections are a large part of this, adding 'life' and 'depth' to scenes, whereas lighting effects, such as lens flare and a blurring technique known as 'bokeh', now occur in the same way they do in films. Epic has promised that developers will now be able to simulate dirt and smudges on the camera lens, which also has not been possible in games before.

KNOWLEDGE IS power when it comes to understanding the steps the industry is making, but thankfully even a basic concept of technology is all that's needed to appreciate that 100 times the number of particles in comparison to the Unreal Engine 3 is a huge difference. For the intellectuals amongst you, this essentially means that where Epic used to be able to render tens to a hundred or so particles on the CPU, they can now show more than one million particles running on the GPU in Unreal Engine 4.

THE POWER OF UNREAL ENGINE 4

LIGHTING HAS always been an area that developers are keen to boast about and exhibit which is, ultimately, lost on the majority of gamers. Although it would be painfully obvious if it wasn't implemented correctly, the steps forward studios take to refine how light works and adapts in a digital world often go unnoticed. While this may be the same with the Unreal Engine 4, it has five times the amount of dynamic lighting sources per pixel compared to its predecessor. More importantly, and easier to understand, is the knowledge that reflective surfaces now look realistic and dynamically emanate nearby objects and colour. You may not be aware, but that's a first for games.

THE PURE processing power that goes into making the 'dark knight', as Epic has dubbed him, is obvious, especially when you consider the serious leap between the two engines. Considering the investment the developer has made when it comes to narrative, however – and whatever you think of *Gears Of War*'s plot, it still marks a significant effort over Unreal Tournament's 'kill some bots' focus – it's also attempting to allow an individual's original visions to shine through. Gameplay events can be connected to sounds and objects via what the company is dubbing colour-coded nodes. It, on the most basic level, allows artists and designers to piece aspects of a level or story together without having to rely on a more traditional programmer. In essence, far less will be lost in the translation.



INFINITY BLADE: DUNGEONS

How Epic will conquer the mobile market

Infinity Blade: Dungeons is different. As far removed from what the IP has become in its first two outings on iOS, this is Epic's first in-house attempt at taking the franchise and branching out into brand new territory. "The big thing to understand is that this is a completely different game from *Infinity Blade*," Epic's Rod Fergusson told **games™**. "There's a reason it's not called *Infinity Blade 3*. The big thing for us is how it started. It came from a passion project here at Epic. After *Gears Of War 3* shipped we decided to have a creative cleansing where we decided to do a game jam – a bunch of different people went off in small teams and tried to create different types of products. One of the ones that was created was this little dungeon crawler and it was really compelling. It was something we could use internally in terms of strategically doing mobile games instead of just Chair doing them so we decided to move forward with it."

Fergusson isn't lying. A dungeon crawler in the most traditional sense, *Dungeons* exists to try and rope in the more casual gaming audience with a format veterans of the genre have been enticed with for years. With a focus on crafting and, naturally, loot, it's the ultimate cyclical challenge with every level opening up more attractive materials with which to become more experienced and powerful. "There are essentially two sides to the game" says Fergusson. "There's the adventuring side of it or the dungeon crawling side of it where you get out exploring and fight monsters and gather more resources like gold, oars and patterns – which are the recipes of how to make a particular type of weapon. The other side is going back to the forge and actually crafting your weapons and that side is really interesting because it's a game in itself. It's not just sticking things in a box, press a button and you get a weapon. You actually have to play a minigame and depending on that minigame you'll be able to improve the quality depending on how well you play that game."

It's indicative of Epic's long-mentioned goal to access a market that it knows is far bigger than just Triple-A console titles, one of the reasons why *Dungeons* has been a co-developed project between itself and Chair. Serving as a prequel to the original games, the story plays around the idea of the Infinity blade being forged for the first time after the main character's family have been murdered by the Deathless. The plan, seemingly, is for the end of the

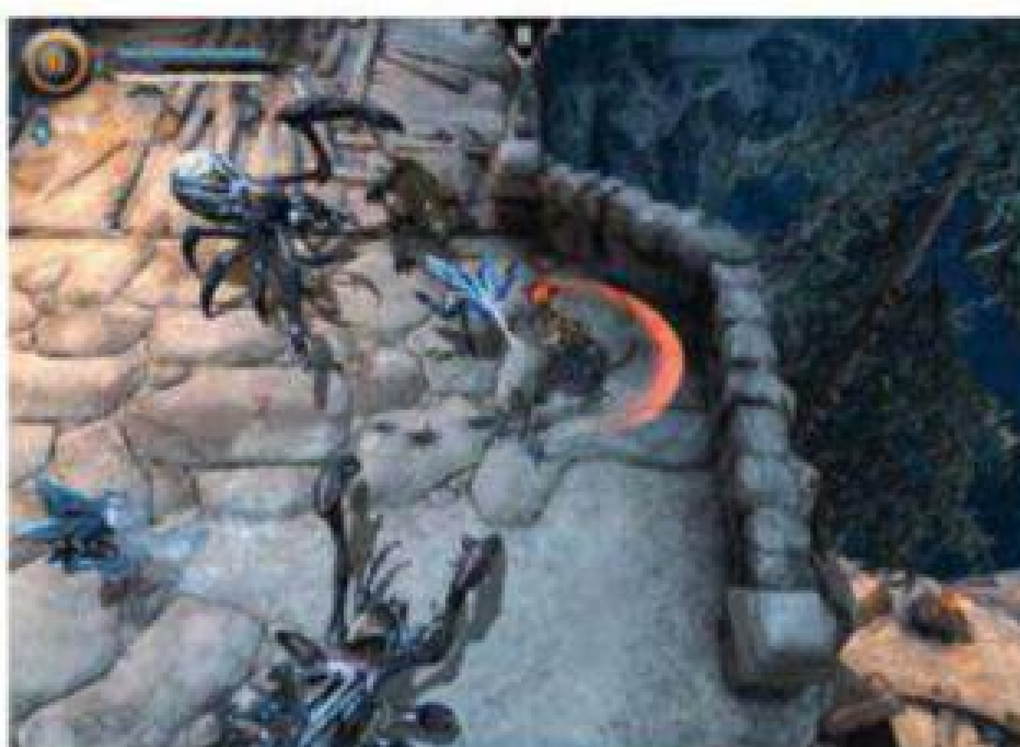


NOT MANY expected *Infinity Blade* to spawn into the franchise it has and the turn towards the dungeon crawler is more surprising still. Taking a step back and looking at Epic's overall goals, however, allows such a move to become much more understandable as it attempts to strike a chord with a different, and new, type of gamer.









"Infinity Blade could easily become the Gears Of War of the iPad, trailblazing the way for everyone else in terms of what's actually possible using the technology at hand"

game to seamlessly transition into the lineages told in the first two iterations. Far more important for Epic, however, is its ability to win over an IOS audience that follows an entirely different rule set to the console gamer it has shown such skill in seducing in the past. "The big thing for us is that we have the intuitive touch controls," Fergusson admits. "We looked at the first two games and they really took advantage of the platform in swiping and everything else. You could tell this was a game for a touch device and that's what we were looking at for *Infinity Blade: Dungeons* as well. We wanted to get away from the existing model that's within the genre of creating an artificial D-Pad and joysticks. [We want to] really embrace the fact these devices are touch based."

This concept runs throughout *Dungeons* too, never getting away from its core idea while constantly retaining this desire to make a significant impact on iOS. It may not be a console-type experience yet, but it's the start of a process that Epic sees as, at least in part, the future. What it is not, is a rival to Blizzard's recent *Diablo III*, as Fergusson himself is keen to point out. "For me it's not a competitor at all. It's basically... you could say there's a stylistic similarity, but I like that I can fire it up and play it on the airplane pretty easily and that's pretty interesting. I've always been a dungeon crawling fan and that's always something I've played since way back with *Diablo* and others but this is just another way to express that and the love for that type of game. You can't compare a mobile game to a game that's been in development for a decade [laughs]."

Ultimately, though, *Infinity Blade: Dungeons* does mark Epic's first proper shift into the mobile space internally and, potentially more interestingly, sees the IP branch out into realms no one could have expected when the original released in late 2010. With talk of how the Unreal Engine 4 could potentially take mobile devices to the next level, although Epic weren't keen to talk about such a subject, *Infinity Blade* could easily become the *Gears Of War* of the iPad, trailblazing the way for everyone else in terms of what's actually possible using the technology at hand. For now, dungeon crawler fans, and those who currently don't even know such a genre exists, could be in for a very unique and original treat before the year is out.

Previously on iOS

How Epic has already made its mark



Infinity Blade

ONE OF the biggest and best games on iOS, with fantastic graphics and satisfying action-RPG gameplay. Developed by a twelve-person team at Epic subsidiary Chair Entertainment over just five months, *Infinity Blade* made millions of dollars within weeks. Due to this, it became the fastest-grossing app ever released on iOS up to that point.



Infinity Blade II

INFINITY BLADE'S sequel continues the story and enhances its highly impressive graphics. There's a tiny bit more freedom to explore and new classes of weapon requiring slightly different fighting styles, resulting in a an experience not quite as repetitive as the first. It also integrated Facebook and other forms of social media, as well as updates that added new equipment, enemies, gems and the rather unique 'treasure map'.



Epic Citadel

THIS FREE app is designed to show off how awesome Unreal Engine 3 is on iOS by letting you wander freely around the environments of *Infinity Blade*, cooing at how pretty they look. There's no gameplay, as such, but there are loads of superb graphics to admire and it showed that games on the iPad or iPhone weren't limited at all. When it was first released, many were quick to compare the sheer visual sheen to current Xbox 360 and PS3 releases.



TURNING BACK THE COGS

EPIC GAMES' CLIFF BLESZINSKI DISCUSSES GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT – THE BRAND'S FIRST SPIN-OFF DEVELOPED BY PEOPLECANFLY – GOING SOFT ON GAMERS, AND WHY THEY WANTED TO TELL ONE MORE STORY

AS EPIC GAMES' CLIFF BLESZINSKI WILL TELL YOU, *GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT* IS NOT THE *GEARS OF WAR* GAME YOU WERE EXPECTING. After all, it would have been a tough sale to suggest that another game in the canon would be announced less than a year after the third's release, developed by PeopleCanFly, and take the story back in time to where Baird – who remained on the sidelines during *Gears 3* providing support and cynical quips – is the focus.

Set 14 years before the events of the first *Gears Of War* and two days after Emergence Day, Baird replaces Marcus Fenix as the thick-necked COG starring front-and-centre. Backed up by Kilo squad, Cole Train also returns to the fray, with newcomers Sophia Hendricks and Garron Paduk stepping into the picture. So far, so very *Gears*.

Despite the returning four-player co-op option, however, PeopleCanFly's main task, or vision, seems to revolve around taking the concept and expanding it beyond the usual scripted and cinematic foundations. Far more open than previously, additions such as randomised spawn points have been integrated in order to bring a stronger sense of replayability to proceedings. It's also, for better or worse, going to be a lot harder too. "We've softened games too much," suggests Bleszinski. "That's the reason why people love *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. Unless you play *Judgment* on Casual difficulty, you're going to die a lot."

In terms of genuine content that can be dissected, though, it's OverRun where Epic and PeopleCanFly have started the hype. Introducing a squad-based system that opens up the option to play as an engineer, soldier, medic or scout, it's certainly a shift away from what many expect from the Microsoft franchise, all tied in to the new undertaking itself. Taking inspiration from last year's Beast

THE LEVEL DESIGN IN OVERRUN MODE PRIORITISES TIGHT AVENUES AND A HANDFUL OF KEY ATTACK POINTS TO CREATE INTENSE SKIRMISHES. IT'S QUITE UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE IN THE SERIES.

mode, the Locust horde have to be upgraded before the more threatening species are unlocked, creating a unique and interesting dynamic that changes when you step across to the human side. No longer are these merely visual skins that separate two teams; they're a learning curve of sorts introduced to add a new layer of depth. As for the core task, it's not too different to what countless games have explored before. A generator exists in the centre of a map and it's your job to either defend or destroy it before time runs out. It's the tweaks to the foundations themselves where the more interesting ideas should start to sprout.

It's an exciting time for the *Gears* franchise, but one fraught with risk. Not that you can tell from Bleszinski's patented conceit and unmistakable energy. The few times he's reluctant to divulge details in when we discuss Epic's intentions for the franchise post-*Judgment*, cancelled Kinect game *Gears Of War: Exile* and how he foresees the franchise evolving in the next generation. "The thing was, if we want to do a proper sequel, we probably want to do something completely different down the line," he says. "*Judgment* is a combination of us finding a window and saying 'Hey, there's room for another great *Gears* game!"

"I WASN'T SURPRISED – HE WAS A SARCASTIC BASTARD AND THAT REFLECTS THE ATTITUDE OF THE INTERNET"

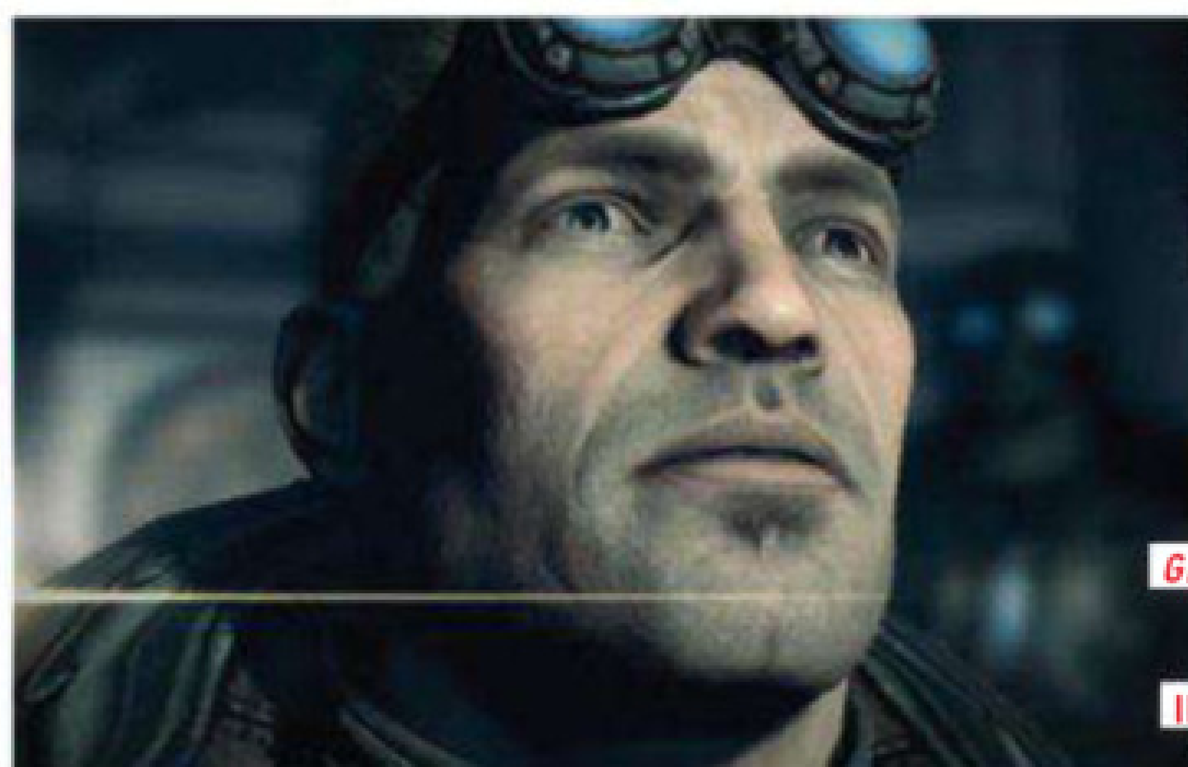
What was the decision behind making a prequel rather than a sequel with a new setting?

We were looking at the timeframe that we could get the game to be great and have it on store shelves for that early 2013 window, and because, of course, there's some kind of pending console transition and we thought there was room to tell one more awesome story in the *Gears* franchise. A prequel usually is kind of a no-brainer that people do. You do a trilogy and then we're going to tell you how it all began! The options there were very on-the-nose, like, exactly what gamers would have expected, right? Option one is to do Emergence Day, but day one the Locusts show up and, well, there was no Lancer – it took them a little while to make the damn thing. So that kind of ruled that out when half the game, instead of being combat, would be all about the setup. Then we thought about Pendulum Wars, and that's just straight-up human-on-human combat, and what makes *Gears* what it is isn't only the Lancer Chainsaw but also the presence of monsters. I want our artists to be able to build these insanely detailed high-poly disgusting creatures that can explode in a variety of interesting ways. So we found a time window there where Baird had disobeyed orders, and you know when we thought about Baird as a character and he hadn't really had a story told. I had some concerns initially about going with Baird but Microsoft did a poll for who the best *Gears* character was, and he was right there near the top and I wasn't surprised – he was a sarcastic bastard and that kind of reflects the attitude of the internet.

It must be hard to take a character like Baird and promote him to lead protagonist when he's predominantly known for being a jaded and cynical character that wisecracks from over on the sidelines?

I think the arc we're trying to go for here is that he's more serious. He's a little bit more like Marcus at the beginning of *Gears Of War,* in that it's him disobeying orders and the trial he has to go through – the *sham* of a trial he has to go through – that turns him into a sarcastic bastard. So he's not really going to be that sarcastic through the entire game; it's more about that destination – his journey getting there. Marcus was always… we always kept his personality dialled back because he's player one. There's a reason why Master Chief only ever says, 'I need a gun,' and that's it, right? There was a reason why Dom was the one going 'Maria!' because it's player two,





■ WHEN WE FIRST MEET BAIRD IN *GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT*, HE'S SIMILAR TO MARCUS. THE STORY WILL SEE HIM TRANSFORM INTO THE BITTER CYNIC WE KNOW AND LOVE.





BLESZINSKI ON BLESZINSKI

EPIC'S MOST FAMOUS FACE ON THE HIGHS, LOWS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE GEARS OF WAR TRILOGY

When *Gears Of War* was in its early stages of development, what was the original design philosophy you had? Did it change before it launched in November 2006?
Yes, the original game was a *Battlefield/Enemy Territory*-style game that featured classes, landscapes, vehicles, and was far more multiplayer oriented. Soon after playing the heck out of games like *Resident Evil 4* and *Kill.Switch*, we realised that we wanted a game that had a fun, summer blockbuster-feeling campaign, with integrated co-op, and a solid, if simple, multiplayer.

Once the credits rolled on *Gears Of War 3*, had it ended and progressed as you always planned? How much changed as you developed the two sequels?
The end did, in fact, turn out as I had hoped, with one big exception. I actually wanted to have the third game originally focus on the space race. Marcus and what was left of humanity were to find a way off of Sera before the entire thing exploded from the Imulsion affliction, later possibly finding another planet where they could restart. Then we saw '2012' and realised that idea, done poorly, would really box us in and be kind of dumb.

***Gears Of War 3*'s closing scene emphatically ended the narrative that had been building up over three games. Do you feel as if you've left Marcus Fenix and Delta Squad fittingly?**
I believe we left Marcus and co. tired and ready to rest, which was always the goal. Marcus just wants to take off his armour and relax on the beach, perhaps reading *50 Shades of Grey* with a Mantini.

The franchise has become synonymous with the Xbox 360, easily one of the consoles biggest games. Did you always anticipate the beast it would become, and do you feel there's added pressure to return to it in the future as the community for it has become so large?
We're proud to have helped Microsoft make their console a success. They've been a great partner. The franchise has done extraordinarily well for all involved. I want to continue to please our die-hards in the future while growing our customer base, which is always a tough thing to do.

There was always plenty of speculation that before the bigger characters were designed, the original character models were far slender and more agile. Was there ever any truth in that and, if so, what prompted the change?
The concepts for Marcus were originally a cool-looking, sci-fi soldier. When these characters were modelled, however, our artists blew out the proportions of the characters. When we got them in game we enjoyed the feel of rolling around with a guy that's like a Mack truck. I never burst into a room and declared, 'I want to see the biggest, manliest men we can create!' It happened organically.

Where did the idea to continually do away with the Carmines come from? Do you feel as if, due to his survival in three, he could be a character you, returned to in the future?
We had gotten used to using the term 'redshirt' around the office on a regular basis. Those who watched the old *Star Trek* shows would get the reference – anyone who left the ship in a red shirt was disposable. Carmine, Rojas, all of these names are also names that mean 'red', and that's been a running gag.



CLIFF BLESZINSKI HAS LEARNT OVER THE YEARS THAT EVERY MINOR ADDITION IMPLEMENTED IN SEQUELS HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GREATLY UPSET THE EXISTING CORE FANBASE.

With a fair few months now passed since *Gears 3*'s release, is there anything you feel could've been done better or smarter over the entire trilogy? Has hindsight taught you anything?
If I could go back in time I would have figured out more ways to continue to make our multiplayer stickier and deeper, while also finding out fun ways to blend the single-player with the multiplayer experience. I would have also learned that no matter what you do players don't always want to stop and pop – they always want to flow through the environments as fast as they possibly can, and that they go for a path-of-least-resistance thought process when it comes to killing their buddies online (shotgun gibs win over executions, for example.) It seems super-obvious now, naturally.

What challenges did you face throughout the development, and did any of these increase as the fanbase did too?
We faced the problems of drowning on our own fiction and universe, as well as figuring out how, over multiple games, you can win a 'battle' but not the war. On the multiplayer side we learned that with each sequel there's always a risk of upsetting fans by adding in new guns. If I could go back in time I would remove the sawed-off shotgun. Yes, I'm willing to admit when I'm wrong.

> "IF I COULD GO BACK IN TIME I WOULD REMOVE THE SAWED-OFF SHOTGUN"

What have you learnt about storytelling, multiplayer and how to get the most out of a third-person shooter?
Here are a few quick ideas off of the top of my head. If you're going to be a sci-fi shooter, embrace every ounce of what that means. Use what science fiction allows you. Make guns always feel like guns, not weird toaster devices. Never assume the audience is stupid. Let players figure things out for themselves. Don't harm your smart, long-term audience at the expense of trying to add in accessibility.

What's your standout moment from the series?
Shipping the entire trilogy and realising all of the things that we did right with it ... and all of the things we've done wrong.

and not as many people play as player two and it's easier for emotions to come from there.

The *Game Informer* teaser cover led a lot of people to believe it would explore Marcus' time in prison, which we now know isn't the case, but will he be featured or referenced?

He might be referenced, but Ron has gone on record and confirmed that there isn't going to be any Marcus or Dom in the game. We feel like they've had three games as being the two main characters, and any time you do a sequel the big question is: what's different?

We have some new characters: we have Sophia Hendricks, she's kind of a young girl, red-headed, an Onyx Guard cadet, kind of an ideal dreamer; then we have a guy called Paduk, who is a UIR soldier – the UIR are of course who the COG fought in the Pendulum Wars – he's this Eastern European, grizzled guy, a kind of bad influence on Baird. Any squad-based game that has characters in it needs a good dynamic, that kind of group so they can ping things back and forth, and each character has their own angle about how they perceive the new threat they're heading into.

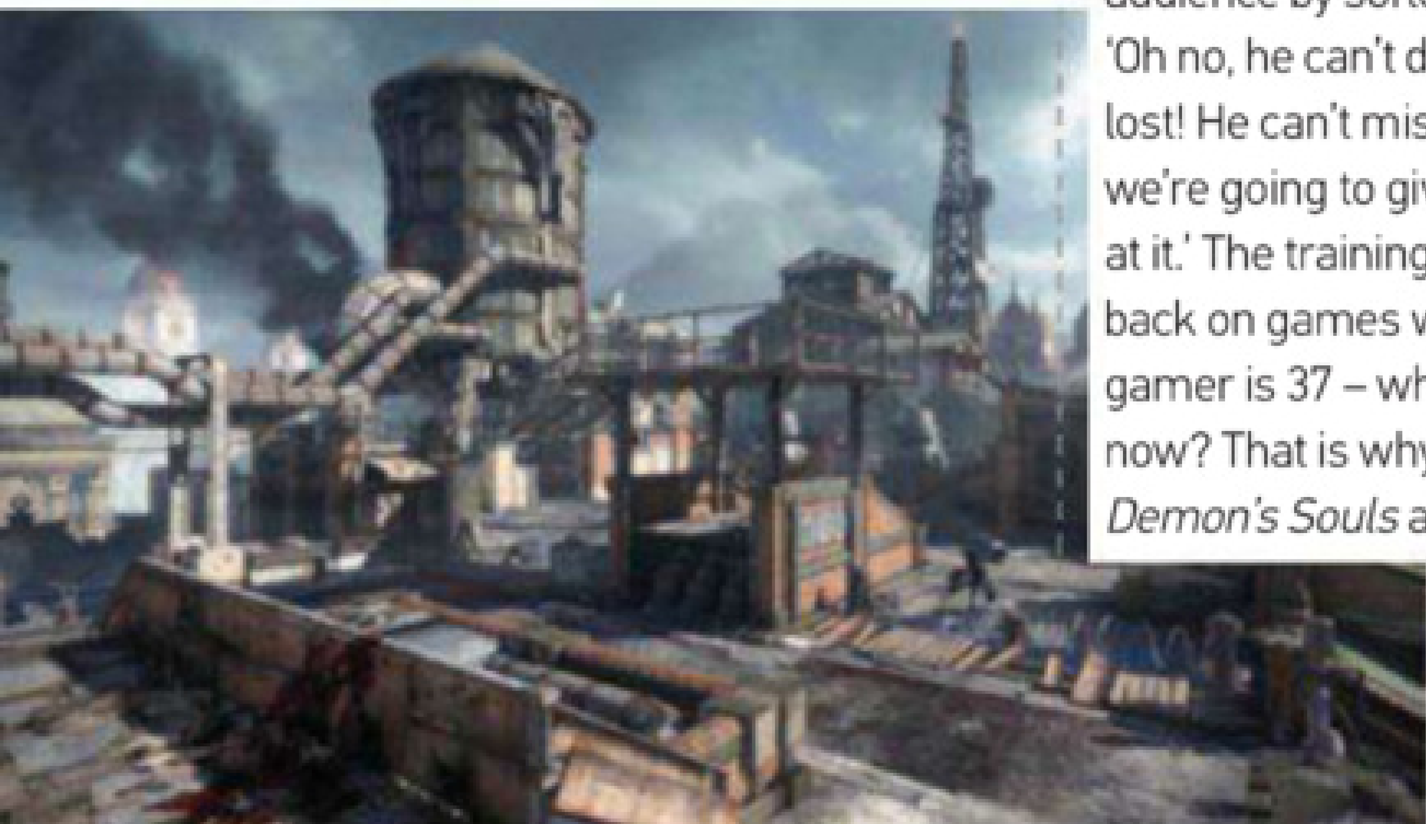
So while the trial of Baird is going on, the game has a series of these flashbacks in which Baird recounts what happened, and then there's these events in there that you can choose to unlock – you see the glowing crimson emblem on the wall – and there's Baird's testimonies, essentially unlocking these memories. It's really interesting that you're forging an interactive memory – of course, in the process of killing all these hideous monsters.

"I'VE HAD A FEW BIG EPIPHANIES AND IT WAS KIND OF A BULLET TO THE HEAD WHEN I SAW SPECTOR GIVE HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH"

Was it important to evolve the storytelling to that degree? Was there a sense of complacency in previous *Gears Of War* sequels when it came to the game's narrative?

It has gotten to the point where the way this generation is with games is that it is walk five feet, cut-scene. Walk five feet. Cut-scene. Walk five feet. Cut-scene. And never die. And we realised that we were partially responsible for that to be honest, and what I refer to as the E3-ification of the industry. I feel like suddenly we've been trying to grow our audience by softening our games, and 'Oh no, he can't die! He can never get lost! He can't miss the chopper fight, so we're going to give him a button to look at it.' The training wheels have gone back on games when the average-age gamer is 37 – what is going on right now? That is why you see games like *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* getting this groundswell and, to be fair, they may have gone a bit far in beating down difficulty. When we talk about games now we talk about scripted sequences, flash, cover systems and animation – but is it challenging? Does the game dynamically adapt to my playstyle to throw new things at me? That has happened with *Judgment*'s new spawn system, a result of a 16-bit shooter type of spawn system where the Genesis games would dynamically adjust depending on what weapon you had and what was coming at you. It's one of those things we've learned from, so you're not peeking around the corner and the wall blows open and it's the same two boomers every time you play the game. That's really good for a game like *Gears* that is traditionally is extremely linear.

It must be difficult with *Gears* being such an important part of the







■ BLESZINSKI ALWAYS WANTED TO IMPLEMENT CLASS-BASED MULTIPLAYER INTO THE *GEARS OF WAR* FRANCHISE. *JUDGMENT* PROVED THE PERFECT TESTING GROUND FOR NEW MODE OVERRUN.

genre to break away from convention. Did you want to experiment and take more risks with this entry?

There are the safe bets with the games and then there's the calculated risk that we take in order to see if they work well. We then learn from them and potentially apply them to future products. I've been dying to do class-based gaming in *Gears* for a while. *Gears* has a very good multiplayer, a great community, but the way to play *Gears* is to wall-bounce and shotgun people in the face. If you can't do that then go home. You'll still be able to do that but, especially in OverRun that we've just announced (and there will be other game modes), the fact is you can play as a Medic and you can heal your teammates, but you'll still have a Lancer, so you can still defend yourself – you're not just staying back with a syringe, cringing. You can play as the Engineer and deploy turrets, repair barriers, you can still use the Gnasher shotgun. So all these classes are useful but allow for this mantra that we've been banging on about at the studio, which is to make games that all gamers can play their own way. The last few years I've had a few big epiphanies, and it was kind of a bullet to the head when I saw Warren Spector give his acceptance speech at the GDC awards this year, where he said, 'We as game designers are always trying to prove to gamers how creative we, are but that's the wrong way to go about it. You need to empower gamers to prove to you how creative they can be with the tools that you give them.' To be fair, it's still going to be a *Gears* game – it's going to be largely linear in regards to where you go in the campaign – but what happens in that campaign with the spawn system, the memories and the declassified stuff is a really good match-up of a couple of systems and spreadsheets that really makes QA hate our guts.

Talking about the new OverRun multiplayer mode, it seems a natural evolution of Horde and Beast modes, but where did the idea originate? Was it Epic or PeopleCanFly?

The first step there was when we shipped *Gears 3* the natural call from everyone was, 'Beast versus Horde! Where's Beast versus Horde?' Well, actually that seems like a no-brainer. But once we got to implementing it, it was actually very difficult because when you have asymmetrical multiplayer it is really hard to balance, and as far as where the idea came from it was the general consensus. But it's important to know, and I've read incorrect new articles that are

COGS OF INFLUENCE

SIX GAMES THAT INFLUENCED THE NEW DIRECTION OF GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

KILL. SWITCH

An influence for the entire *Gears Of War* franchise, *Kill. Switch* was the first third-person shooter to implement a cover system and a blindfire mechanic. While *Gears* proliferated the use of the mechanic, it all began right here.

DEMON'S/ DARK SOULS

Bleszinski has criticised games for being too soft on gamers, and intends to rectify that with *Gears Of War: Judgment*. While you shouldn't expect quite the same level of merciless punishment evident in the *Souls* series, *Judgment* will keep players guessing with randomised spawn points, dynamic enemy AI and the sheer volume of Locust troops swarming enemies.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Class-based multiplayer is something that Bleszinski wanted to implement into *Gears* for a while, and *Judgment* takes the template made popular by *Team Fortress* by implementing classes such as Engineer and Medic into the game.

CALL OF DUTY

"I had a quote a few years ago, before a lot of this stuff really became mainstream," says Bleszinski, "and not to give myself too much credit, but I said the future of shooters is in RPGs." *Call Of Duty* has changed the way developers approach multiplayer shooters, with XP, unlocks and customisable classes, all areas that *Judgment* evolves in its revised multiplayer.

BULLETSTORM

PeopleCanFly is a natural fit for the *Gears* franchise. The developer's previous collaboration with Epic Games was *Bulletstorm* – a foul-mouthed, weighty first-person shooter that shared notable comparisons with *Gears*. Utilising the licence, expect a similarly punchy campaign with engaging characters (minus the potty mouths).

LEFT 4 DEAD

Teamwork has always been the backbone to the *Gears* franchise, and that's never been truer than in the new OverRun multiplayer mode. Much like *Left 4 Dead*, players will find themselves forced to cooperate under tense monster attack, while embodying one of the handful of distinct characters.

WHERE WERE THEY THEN?

WHILE BAIRD IS KNEE-DEEP IN LOCUST GUTS, WHERE ARE THE OTHER COGS, AND CAN WE EXPECT AN APPEARANCE?

DAMON BAIRD

FANS WILL remember Baird for his sharp tongue and laconic jibes but the Baird we meet at the beginning of *Judgment* is one of pride and honour, leading Kilo Squad against a new Locust threat. *Judgment* will chart Lieutenant Baird's journey from loyal soldier to disillusioned cynic, promising that we'll never look at him quite the same way again.

AUGUSTUS COLE (COLE TRAIN)

JUDGMENT WILL delve deeper into Cole's difficult choice to switch from professional Thrashball player to military grunt. Turning his back on fame and fortune, Cole misses his old lifestyle and is second-guessing his choice to enlist despite the dire need for soldiers after Emergence Day. Still, bound by a sense of duty, he soon becomes firm friends with Baird. While his exaggerated behaviour can seem annoying, he actually does it in order to keep the spirits of those around him up in these dark times.

ANYA STROUD

THE OTHER fan-favourite character, Anya will be battling the Locust hordes elsewhere and fawning over Marcus, her secret lover. While Anya is in the COG military forces, having played a part in some major battles, she doesn't get up to anything particularly notable during this time period, so her making an appearance in *Judgment* is quite unlikely.

MARCUS FENIX

AT THIS point in the *Gears* canon, Marcus is earning himself a reputation as a fearsome leader of men, something established during the Pendulum Wars at the battle of Aspho Field. His role as a hero has become even more important since the Locust invasion on Emergence Day. While he won't cross paths with Baird until some time later, the likelihood that Baird will hear of Fenix's bravery from his side of the battlefield is high. We may also find out a bit more about Marcus' relationship with his father, whom, during the Battle of Epyhra, is rescued by Marcus at the sacrifice of abandoning his post. It's this crucial point in the beloved character's history that we expect to be explored in greater detail, even if it's on an auxiliary basis.

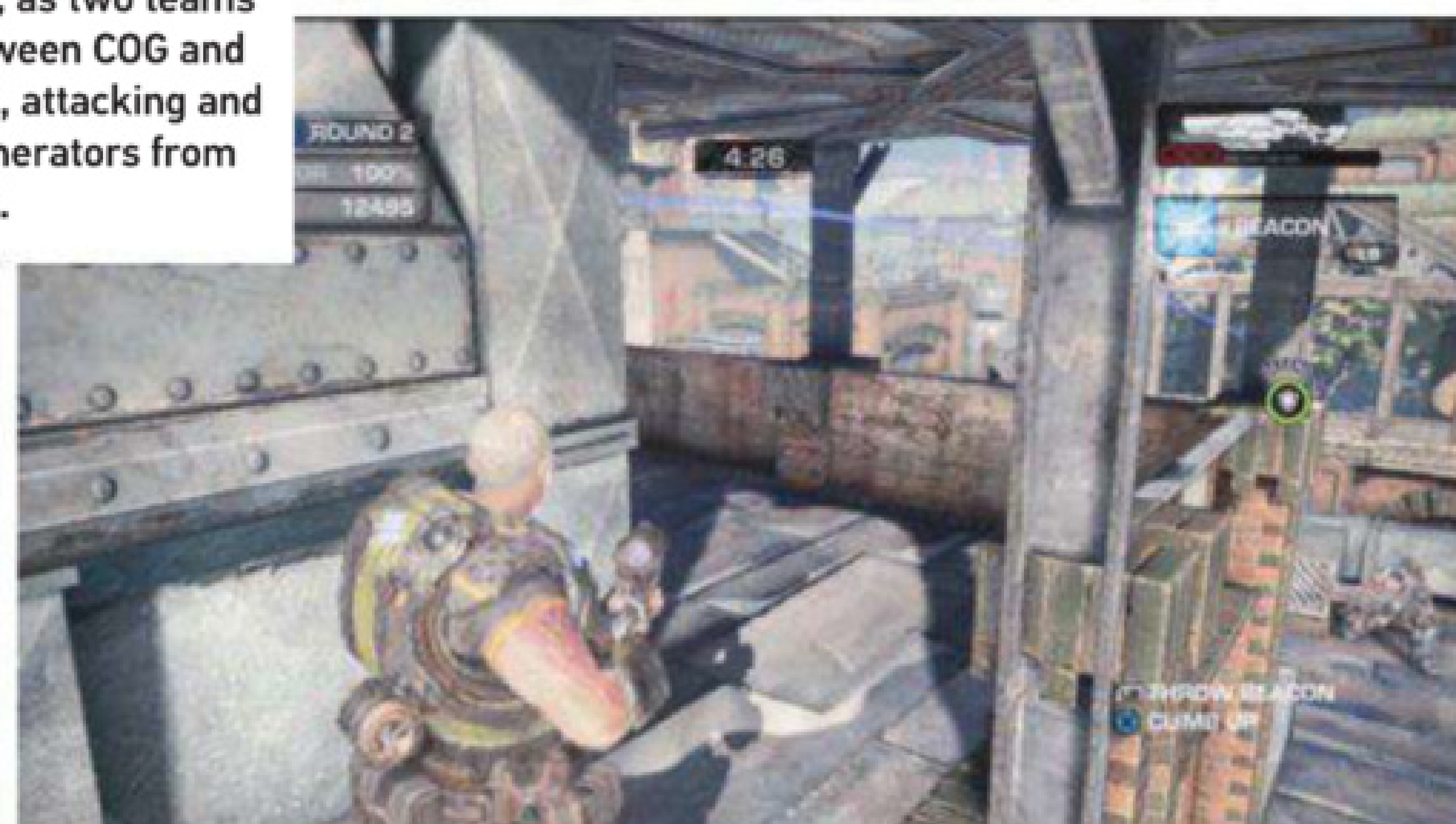
DOMINIC SANTIAGO

DOM HAS been the emotional epicentre to the *Gears* series. His brother Carlos was Marcus's best friend, and his heroic death in combat would lead to Dom taking over that role. It would also help inspire his decision to join the COG military. During the timeline of *Judgment*, Dom will be reeling from the loss of his two children – the fallout of which will result in his wife Maria disappearing. Whether he'll appear in *Judgment* or not is unknown, but expect any appearance or reference to tug on the ol' heartstrings.









MULTIPLAYER

■ *Judgment* introduces class-based multiplayer to *Gears Of War*, as two teams alternate between COG and Locust forces, attacking and defending generators from enemy forces.

"I'M ACTUALLY RUNNING IN THE FLASHBACK AND IT WAS LIKE 'WOW, I HAVEN'T SEEN ANYTHING A LOT LIKE THIS BEFORE"

like 'Epic hands the franchise off to PCF!' No. The only handing that's going on here is holding hands together. I assure you I have plenty of people right now who are working on numerous elements of this game, playtesting it in their labs on a daily basis while PCF work on their own components. Because of the slightly compressed timeframe for this game – this isn't two and a half years like *Gears 3* – this is slightly less development time to get it out for early 2013. You look at the videos for the latest *Call Of Duty* and you have the Sledgehammer CEO, the Treyarch CEO and the CEO of Virgin Atlantic. It's like, 'How many people are working on this thing?' That's really kind of what it takes to make a shooter in 2012/2013. You can't just ship out a cool eight-hour campaign; you need a really deep multiplayer experience attached to it.

Where did the concept come from? Did PeopleCanFly approach you with the idea?

Then PCF wanted Baird and Adrian and the guys were pitching the trial of Baird, which again I was very sceptical about until I heard the data. And the first time I picked up the level and heard Baird's voice in the courtroom and the gavel hitting as I'm actually running in the flashback, it was like, 'Wow, I haven't seen anything a lot like this before.' A side-note about the story: as I was talking about cut-scenes interrupting every two seconds, we don't have that finger-in-ear crap anymore. We don't slow you down – once you're in a level, you're in it.

Each level is a series of protracted battles before the next cut-scene, and when the cut-scene does show up you're happy to see the story advance, but also you're happy to have a break from the action, because the action is so intense and asks so much of you that you're palms are sweaty you can put the controller down and grab a beer. That's what we forget; the cut-scene isn't just there to further the narrative. If you want to make a movie, go make a movie. Cut-scenes should be there to be a well-timed break from the videogame action, and that's what we're trying to get back to.

We guess that's where PCF can inject some inventiveness in terms of the weapon design?

There's one great combat scenario where you have to fight up a series of staircases, and it's a really long protracted battle because at the start there are some enemies that have the one-shot and then go back to the elephant gun that has the laser sight on it and just pink mists people. We're just like, 'It's on! You better get to cover or roll away because you'll pink mist.' But once you finally get to the top and you realise that you've just killed about seven of these guys with the one-shot, everybody in co-op grabs one and all of a sudden you get flanked from behind, or eight Maulers come through with their shields and you're just like, 'Boom! Boom!' It's a great classic videogame moment of being oppressed and then being the oppressor. It's the core of it all, right? Giant monster comes through the door with a gun, you almost die, you fight, kill the monster, then get the monster's big gun and then you take out the other guys… then repeat that cycle.

It was revealed that *Gears Of War: Exile* and *Bulletstorm 2* were cancelled. Were there any ideas with those that made it into *Judgment*?

Ooo, that's real tricky – I like that. There are not a lot of things that wound up in there. There's one thing actually that you just reminded me of though, is that we are not supporting Kinect in *Gears Judgment*. I like Kinect, I've been a fan of it, but I don't think it has been fully realised as far as the potential of the device. *Dance Central 3* looks great and all, but I'm curious how the 'core' games will work out…

Gears would be perfect to do that, surely?

You could, but you know I always said that I'd rather build a completely dedicated Kinect game from the ground up with true focus as opposed to, 'Oh yeah, Marcus can move his head now!' then you wind up with SixAxis… and no one really wants that. 



Apocalypse When?

After six years in development hell, just what has become of Fallout Online?

games™ investigates its troubled history



Images of Interplay's *Fallout Online* were submitted as evidence during the trial, and leaked online last year.

Although *The Elder Scrolls Online* has only recently been announced and looks very interesting indeed, it's somewhat strange that it would be the first MMO to be announced by Bethesda's new studio Zenimax Online, given that a *Fallout* MMO has been in development, on and off, for at least a decade. Of course, there are reasons for this. Though Bethesda now fully owns the rights to the *Fallout* series, that hasn't always been the case. It has acquired ownership of the IP, bit by bit, over the past eight years, and only recently secured the rights to the *Fallout* MMO after a lengthy legal war of attrition with original developer Interplay. As such, the story of *Fallout Online* doesn't begin with the forthcoming announcement; it arguably ends with it...

The idea of a *Fallout* MMO dates back further than you may first think – as far back as the late Nineties, in fact. Riding high on the success of the first two *Fallout* games, and inspired by the popularity of early MMO breakthroughs like *Ultima Online* and *Everquest*, Interplay floated the idea of making its post-apocalyptic RPG into a massively multiplayer experience.

"Gamespot had run a poll asking which game the gamers would have most liked to have seen in an MMO, and *Fallout* was number one," says Brian Fargo, Interplay founder and executive producer of Fallout. "This was over *The Sims*, *Wing Commander*, et cetera. I was certainly interested in pursuing this idea."

Fargo approached Feargus Urquhart – director of the first two *Fallout* games at Black Isle Studios and now CEO of Obsidian Entertainment – with his idea, but Urquhart wasn't quite as enthusiastic as those Gamespot readers. "My answer was no," he tells us. "I didn't feel MMOs were the type of games that Black Isle made and I didn't feel that Interplay had the resources (money) to really make it right at the time. So, after I said no it was turned over to a different group and I didn't hear anything else about it for years."

"Having Feargus say no would hardly deter me," adds Fargo. "MMOs did not cost 100 million dollars in the late Nineties, but regardless we were not in a good financial position to take advantage, so no doubt the timing was bad." Following Black Isle's rejection of the idea, the task of developing a *Fallout* MMO is believed to have fallen to Engage, an Interplay company founded in 1996 to create online games, but went nowhere as Interplay continued to experience financial difficulties.

Original *Fallout* designer Tim Cain also remembers this time, and shares Urquhart's opinion. "I don't remember much," he concedes. "I didn't interact much with Engage, but I do remember warning them that a game built around the player being a solitary wanderer in a lonely wasteland might not be the best choice for an MMO. That and the name *Fallout Online* had an unfortunate acronym: FOOL."

Whatever Fargo's ambitions, they were not to be played out at Interplay. Those financial difficulties got much worse as the company struggled to transition into the burgeoning console market, and the developer was eventually acquired by French publisher Titus. Within years, the Interplay empire was almost entirely dismantled. Fargo departed the company in 2001 after several disagreements with new owners Herve and Eric Caen, and Black Isle Studios was

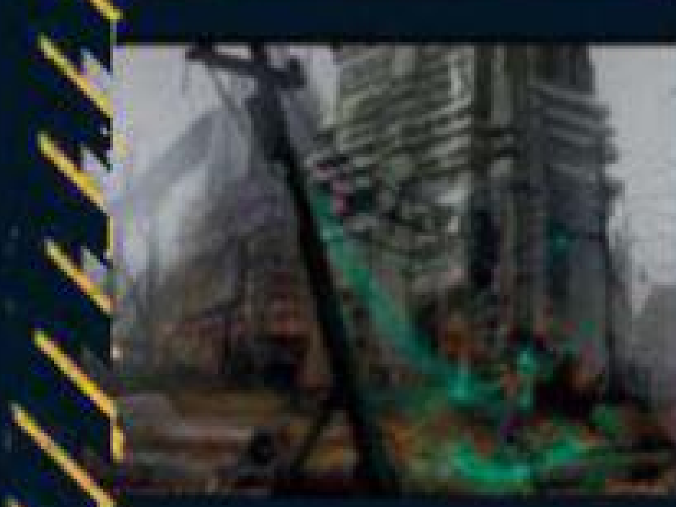
"Fallout was a mash-up of the style and quirky humor of Terry Gillian's Brazil and the Western-themed post apocalyptic adventure of the Road Warrior"













shut down completely in 2003, its unfinished *Fallout 3* shelved permanently. The series seemed dead, but then something unexpected happened. The *Elder Scrolls* developer showed an interest in the series and, in 2004, licensed the rights to develop their own *Fallout 3*.

As interest in Bethesda's *Fallout 3* grew in tandem with Interplay's ailing fortunes, the entire *Fallout* IP was eventually sold to Bethesda in 2007, with two caveats: Interplay would retain the right to publish and sell existing releases *Fallout*, *Fallout 2* and *Fallout Tactics* and, more interestingly, it retained a licence to create its own *Fallout* MMO. By 2008, with the incredible success of *Fallout 3* assured, these rights must have seemed like a licence to print money.

Yet holding onto those rights wasn't exactly going to be easy. In order to retain the rights, Interplay needed to have begun development by April 2009, as well as needing to acquire $30 million in development funds. If these requirements were not met then the rights would default back to Bethesda. The same year this agreement was made, Bethesda founded MMO developer Zenimax Online Studios. The publisher's intentions seemed clear.

Despite all odds seemingly stacking against it, however, Interplay forged ahead with its *Fallout* MMO plans and, in November 2007, it re-opened in-house development and hired Jason Anderson, lead designer and artist on the original *Fallout*, to lead what it called *Project V13*, an MMO named after the unlucky-for-some vault of *Fallout*.

Anderson had previously left Interplay in 1998 to co-found Troika Games, worked on a number of critically acclaimed PC RPGs and even pitched against Bethesda for the license to *Fallout 3*, until the studio closed down in 2005 after a string of commercially disappointing releases. "Following Troika Games' demise, I was disenchanted with the game industry and took some time to off to be with my family," Anderson tells us. "After a couple of years, I heard through the grapevine that Hervé [Caen] was looking into getting the project off the ground. I contacted him to see if I could be of help. *Fallout* had changed so much since 1997 and it was exciting to write, giving me the chance to get out there what *Fallout* was originally about."

As he suggests, Anderson felt that some of the original *Fallout*'s tone had been lost over the years, and it was this that he hoped to recapture in *Project V13*. "Stylistically," he says, "it was going to be truer to the original vision of *Fallout*, even going as far as having the rendering style of a graphic novel. Early on in F*allout*'s development, Leonard [Boyarsky] really wanted us to capture the rendering style Geoff Darrow's work in the *Hard Boiled* comics. Though we were able to get some of the retro elements, there was no way to create the inked heavy detail with the graphic technology available at the time."

Right in the middle of the design phase, Bethesda's *Fallout 3* was released to critical acclaim and took the series off in a bold new direction, but *Project V13* remained an online interpretation of the first *Fallout*. "My goal was to remain true to the original vision," says Anderson, "though admittedly, I am not sure if that is what all of the *Fallout* fans would have liked, but that is the vision I chose to go with. I felt it was a lot cooler than the direction the sequels had ended up going."

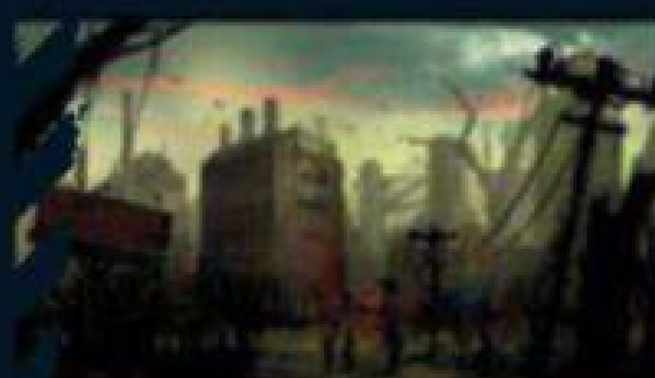
Anderson elaborates: "*Fallout* was a mash-up of the style and quirky humor of Terry Gillian's *Brazil* and the western-themed post-apocalyptic adventure of *The Road Warrior*. The Fifties kitsch came in later. *Fallout 3* ended up being a mash-up of the kitschy *Fallout* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This all being said, I don't see it as a bad thing, *Fallout* took on a life of its own and that's cool. Though, I'm obviously partial to the original. I grew up in the Eighties and love 'post-apocalyptic adventure', not 'post-apocalyptic I-might-as-well-shoot-myself-in-the-head-because-everything-sucks'."

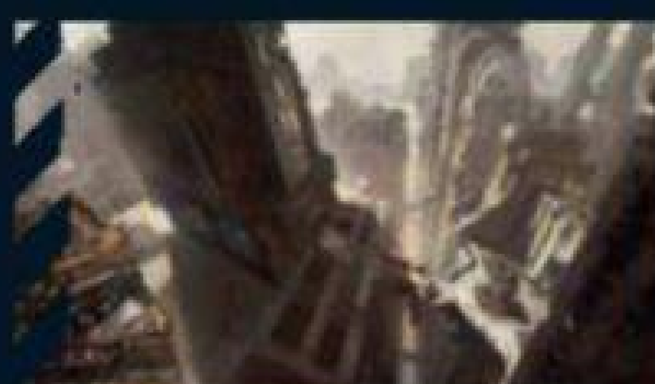
Both Interplay's *Road Warrior*-inspired *Fallout* and Bethesda's videogame take on *The Road* in *Fallout 3* had one thing in common, though – they both cast the player as lone warrior in a hostile environment. Anderson agrees that this seemed to go completely against the idea of a massively multiplayer online game. "Incorporating *Fallout* into an MMO environment is in a lot of ways the antithesis of the original design," he says. "*Fallout* was about being a lone wanderer, which you are not going to be in an MMO. It was also about deep, meaningful quests that impact the entire world, something not really suited for MMOs either. So creating a *Fallout* MMO was intriguing and challenging. For instance, while *Fallout* was all about you being the lone hero, the post-apocalyptic genre is more about survivors banding together for survival, which does work well within an MMO.



It's not known if the leaked *Fallout Online* images are WIP screens or concept images of the intended final product.

"Throughout production it became increasingly evident that Bethesda had no intention of letting this game go forward"









"I took special care in focusing on the social aspects of MMOs, aiming to take it to the next level," Anderson continues. "Many mechanics were built into the design with the goal of strengthening the social bonds between players, since that is really what an MMO is all about. But don't worry; there was an equal effort put into the PvP experience. The world of *PV13* would have been a brutal world." It really seems as though *Project V13* would have managed the impossible – a massively multiplayer game that also felt lonely. Much like the classic films and books of the post-apocalyptic genre, not every inhabitant of the world would have been one you could trust, creating huge potential for a genre that rarely, if ever, experiments with its social side.

Sadly, Anderson's plans, much like Fargo's, were not to be. Production initially went well, according to Anderson, but it didn't last. "It was a very small team," he says. "We would spend half the day meeting on design and the other half of the day writing up documents on what was decided. The major problem was getting anything approved by Bethesda. And sadly, there was no breakthrough. Throughout production it became increasingly evident that Bethesda had no intention of letting this game go forward. It was impossible to get anything approved through Bethesda, a condition required of the contract with Interplay. They would ignore our requests and not respond at all. It felt to

A Brief History Of Fallout Online

1996
- Brian Fargo founds Engage, an online gaming portal and publisher.
- Late Nineties – Brian Fargo suggests a *Fallout MMO*. Black Isle declines to develop.

1998
- The majority of Interplay shares are acquired by French publisher Titus.

2000
- *Fallout Tactics* developer Micro Forte is apparently contracted to develop a *Fallout* MMO that never goes anywhere.
- Brian Fargo leaves Interplay and Titus's Herve Caen takes over as CEO.

2004
- Bethesda Softworks licenses the right to develop *Fallout 3* from a struggling Interplay.

2006
- Nov 2006 – Interplay's intention to develop a *Fallout* MMO is made public through paperwork submitted to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission.

2007
- Apr 2007 – Bethesda buys up the full rights to the *Fallout* series and Interplay licences the right to develop its *Fallout* MMO.
- Aug 2007 – Zenimax Online, the MMO focused partner of Bethesda, is opened for business under the guidance of *Dark Age Of Camelot* designer Matt Firor.
- Nov 2007 – *Original Fallout* designer Jason Anderson joins Bethesda to concept *Project V13*.

me that they had no intention of allowing the game to go forward. In looking over the contract between Interplay and Bethesda, it became very clear to me that Bethesda had no intention of ever allowing Interplay to actually create an MMO. Right about this time, Brian Fargo contacted me and asked me to come head up the *Wasteland 2* project."

This was 2009, and as Anderson departed for Fargo's InXile Entertainment he left *Project V13* fully designed and Interplay looking for investment to fund development. Which is where it all started to go wrong. By 1 April 2009, Interplay was just three days away from its deadline – to enter full development of *Fallout Online* or relinquish the licence to Bethesda. A day later, it announced a partnership with Bulgarian developer Masthead Studios to complete development of *V13* by using the same engine that Masthead had created for its own post-apocalyptic MMO, *Earthrise*. But less than two weeks later, on 15 April, Interplay received notice from Bethesda claiming that it intended to reclaim the rights to *Fallout Online* since Interplay had failed to honour the full agreement outlined in 2007. Interplay disputed the claims, and so began a lengthy legal battle that Interplay would eventually lose.

To the outside world, however, things looked promising. In June 2010 Interplay officially announced that *Project V13* was *Fallout Online* and began sending out regular newsletters about the game, including concept art, a teaser trailer and developer diaries. A beta test was even mooted. At this time, **games™** contacted Eric Caen for more details on *Fallout Online*, but Caen replied saying that the litigation between Interplay and Bethesda made direct communication with the press "problematic". Why was Interplay willing to hype *Fallout Online* in newsletters but not speak openly in the press? We can only speculate.

Bethesda's case, submitted to a Delaware court and now in the public domain, argued that Interplay had not secured anywhere near the $30 million required to fund *Fallout Online*, had supplied *Fallout*-branded materials to developer Masthead without Bethesda's permission, had failed to show evidence of a single line of *Fallout MMO* game code and, as such, its promotion of *Fallout Online* at www.fallout-on-line.com was a direct violation of Bethesda's



If a studio does have the talent to produce the vision outlined in Bethesda's concept art then that would be a great game.





WHY WAIT?

Five post-nuclear MMOs you can play now

Fallen Earth
This is about as close as you'll get to a *Fallout* MMO for now. It's actually a lot like *Fallout: New Vegas* in many ways. The Hoover Dam is in it, it's deep and complex, it had loads of bugs on launch...

CrimeCraft
A multiplayer shooter MMO set in an urban future in which heavily armed gangs rule the streets. The two sides of the game don't blend very well, but it does at least look a bit like *Fallout*.

Earthrise
Initially developed by Masthead Studios, the Bulgarian team commissioned to develop a *Fallout* MMO by Interplay before lawsuits from Bethesda cancelled the project, apocalyptic sci-fi MMO *Earthrise* is now being developed by SilentFuture for a relaunch later this year.

Shin Megami Tensei: Imagine
This MMO spin-off of the popular Japanese RPG series, *Shin Megami Tensei: Imagine* is set in MegaTen, a world ravaged not by a nuclear apocalypse but by a demonic apocalypse.

Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent
This might look like your typical sexy fantasy steampunk MMO, but it's set in the aftermath of a massive, continent-shattering apocalyptic earthquake, so it definitely counts and no barrel has been scraped to fill out this boxout.

2008
- Jun 2008 – The Interactive Game Group purchases 2 million shares of Interplay as part of an agreement to develop a game, thought to be *Project V13*.
- Oct 2008 – *Fallout 3* is released.

2009
- Apr 2009 – Bethesda begins legal proceedings intending to reclaim the *Fallout* MMO rights and accuses of Interplay of breaching the terms of its licence agreement.
- Apr 2009 – As the agreed deadline for commencement of full production approaches, Interplay announces that Masthead Studios will develop *Project V13*.

2010
- June 2010 – *Project V13* is officially revealed to be *Fallout Online*.
- Oct 2010 – *Fallout: New Vegas* is released.

2012
- Jan 2012 – The *Fallout* MMO rights are finally restored to Bethesda.
- May 2012 – *The Elder Scrolls Online* is announced.

2013
- Apr 2013 – The final date by which Interplay's *Fallout Online* should have been released if legally continued.

2014
- Oct 2014 – Predicted release of *Fallout 4*.

2015
- Dec 2015 – Predicted released of *Fallout Online*.

copyright as of April 2009. With public records supporting Bethesda's claims that Interplay lacked significant capital, and a judge dismissing Masthead's ability to testify in court, Interplay was left without a compelling defense and was eventually found to have not met the terms of the April 2007 licensing agreement for the *Fallout* MMO. And in January 2012, Bethesda announced that it had finally regained the licence to the *Fallout* MMO. Only the right to sell the first three Fallout games remained with Interplay, though this right will expire in December 2013.

So where does this leave *Project V13*? The licensing agreement with Bethesda states that any part of the MMO not relating to copyrighted *Fallout* material remains with Interplay. So the company could, in theory, complete development of Jason Anderson's proposed post-apocalyptic MMO in an original world with new backstory and characters. Is this a possibility? *Project V13* is still advertised on Masthead's official website, while a public *V13* forum is still active on Interplay's site. But it remains true that Interplay's financial difficulties leave it ill-equipped to develop a successful and significant MMO. Both Interplay and Masthead were contacted by **games™** on this matter but declined to comment.

Which only leaves Bethesda and Zenimax Online. With the rights to *Fallout Online* now under the same roof as *Fallout 3*, it is surely time for Zenimax to show its hand. "I'd be surprised if they weren't thinking about it at least," says the sage *Fallout 2* and *New Vegas* designer Chris Avellone. "They went to the legal battlegrounds for a reason."

Naturally, we asked Bethesda to comment, but the answers from the studio's executive producer Todd Howard are wooly at best. On the subject of the *Project V13* design done to date, he says, "I don't think that work transferred to Bethesda, but I'm not sure," while his comment about the current status of a new *Fallout Online* skillfully sidesteps the issue. "Our studio, Bethesda Game Studios, doesn't plan on making MMOs, so I can't really say what the overall company may do with it," he says, at once denying his own involvement without commenting on what Zenimax Online might be up to.

So how far away might a new *Fallout Online* be? By Bethesda's estimates, as outlined in its 2007 agreement with Interplay, it would expect a *Fallout* MMO to be completed and commercially released within four years of the start of full development, allowing for an extra two years for pre-production and resource acquisition. Does that suggest a *Fallout Online* release date of 2018? We doubt it very much. It's hard to believe that Zenimax doesn't have the funds to enter full development whenever it likes, while the existence of Zenimax Online, now in its sixth year of operation, suggests that a technical infrastructure, game engine and experienced development team are already in place. Bethesda itself estimated a minimum development team of 55 members in order to create a *Fallout* MMO in 2009, and we know that Zenimax Online currently has over 200 employees. Could it have two games in different stages of development at once? We wouldn't rule it out. *The Elder Scrolls Online* needs to be finished first before Zenimax would be willing to confirm a new MMO, of course. But after that, we wouldn't be surprised to see *Fallout Online* released as soon as 2015. Only around fifteen years after Brian Fargo first thought up the idea. Let's hope it's worth the wait.

A Vision Of The Future

What we expect from Bethesda's Fallout Online

America Online

■ ONE OF THE most interesting things about *The Elder Scrolls Online* is that it brings together previous *Elder Scrolls* locations like Morrowind and Skyrim in one game, which makes sense for a genre as vast as the MMO. It would make sense for *Fallout Online* to therefore cover several parts of the post-nuclear USA, incorporating familiar locations such as the New California Republic, the Capital Wasteland and New Vegas in one game. But what time period would they take place in? Set the game before the other *Fallout* games and any gameworld changes expressed by players potentially become non-canonical. The history of the series isn't far reaching enough for an *Old Republic*-style solution, so a setting a few hundred years after the other games makes the most sense.



Public dungeons

■ *THE ELDER SCROLLS Online* director Matt Firor has revealed a taste for the public dungeons used by *Everquest* but since abandoned in favour of instanced quests, and intends to reinstate them in *TESO*. Don't be surprised if they appear in *Fallout Online* too. The world of *Fallout* has potential to do interesting things with player interaction. Do you want to form fragile alliances, temporarily helping each other out in fear that one might screw over the other in the end? You should be able to. Do you want to stalk another player through a dungeon, waiting for them to die before you loot their corpses in desperation? These, and more, are the sorts of things a *Fallout* MMO should do.



More Of The Same



■ THE *FALLOUT* SERIES is one that has survived multiple generations, adapting to different styles of RPG because its setting, backstory and characters have always remained at its heart. As such, *Fallout* director Feargus Urquhart tells us that this is the key to making *Fallout* work as an MMO. "The *Fallout* brand already made a big transition from the early *Fallout* games to *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas*," he says. "It was able to do so because the later games embraced what *Fallout* is – a crazy, post-apocalyptic, Fifties-inspired, survivalist, wild west wasteland with the charm of the Vault Boy. Sticking to that and not straying from it is what would make a *Fallout Online* successful."

Narrative Focus

■ "THERE MIGHT BE some interesting ideas to explore in an MMO where the player needs to feel isolated and alone, but in truth, the single-player version of the game interests me much more," says *Fallout* designer Tim Cain. And he certainly isn't alone in his opinion. A sense of isolation is important to *Fallout* fans, so perhaps Jason Anderson's idea of making players hostile toward each other will survive the transition to Bethesda. We wouldn't too surprised to see Zenimax Online take a similar approach to *Star Wars: The Old Republic* too, creating a massively multiplayer game that can be played alone, with just as much narrative content and voiced dialogue as *Fallout 3*.



Free-to-play

■ WHILE *THE ELDER Scrolls Online* is likely to follow a subscription model, at least to begin with, expect it to be one of the last of its kind. Free-to-play appears to be the future, not just for MMOs but for many types of games, but with MMOs way ahead of the curve they will make the full transition first. If *Fallout Online* is released as late as 2015, we'd fully expect it to be free-to-play. What's more interesting though is how Zenimax would choose to monetise the game, and whether it could do so in a way that actually enriches the player experience. Having to pay for Nuka Cola bottle caps would be an obvious example that, if handled intelligently, could actually emphasise *Fallout*'s harsh, resource-light setting.





All concept art is taken from development of Interplay's *Fallout Online*, and is in no way representative of Bethesda's vision for the licence.

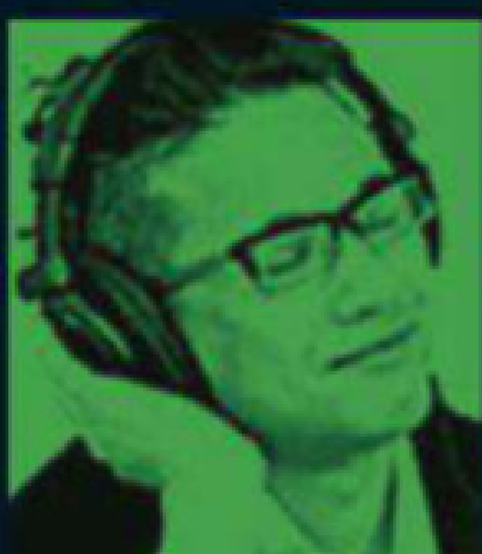
Worldwide consequence

■ ONE OF THE defining qualities of the *Fallout* series is that it attaches meaningful consequences to player actions. An MMO would naturally have to feature such choice and consequence on a massive scale, which is certainly ambitious. But ambition is not stranger to this series anyway. *Fallout: New Vegas* featured its own fantastic sense of cause and effect, with player actions determining the political landscape of the area. Now imagine that with every player affecting the way the world works. *Eve Online* already does similar things with its economy to huge acclaim so an even greater sense of global consequence would be very welcome.

WHERE NOW FOR RHYTHM-ACTION?

Following the apparent death of Guitar Hero last year, rhythm-action finds itself at a crossroads. Give up or try something new. With that in mind, **games™** polled six music game experts on the future of the genre and asked whether it has really evolved enough since PaRappa The Rapper. Here's what they had to say...

THE EXPERTS



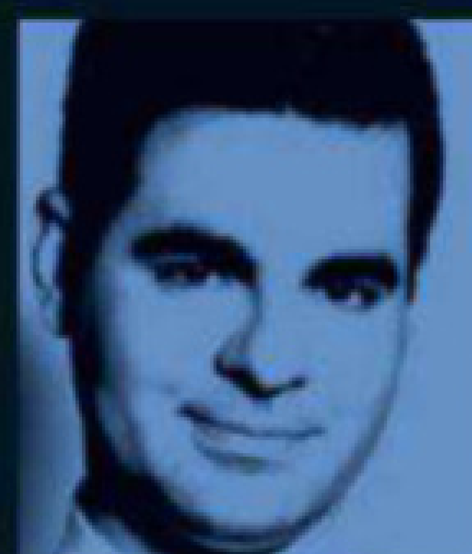
MASAYA MATSUURA
As the creator of *Parappa The Rapper* and the father of the rhythm-action genre, Masaya Matsuura obviously feels strongly about this subject, and unsurprisingly feels that the genre has much further to go. "As I have been stating on many occasions, the rhythm-action game is the ultimate marriage of music and interactivity," he tells us, adding that developers must first find a way to strengthen that marriage before the genre can truly evolve.



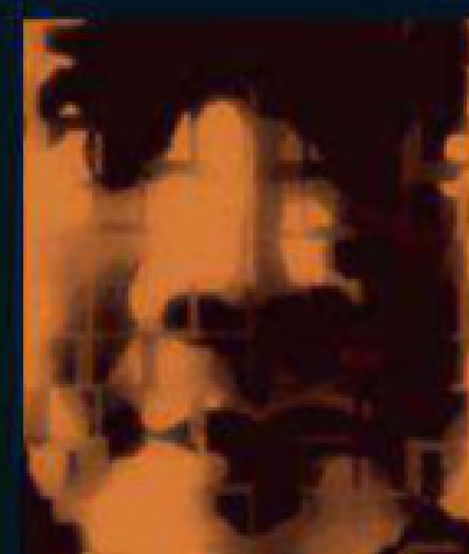
AKIRA YAMAOKA
The composer of *Silent Hill* is one of the most inventive musicians in the games industry, and one of the few who considers the nature of interactivity in his compositions. He recently worked on a *Neon Genesis Evangelion* rhythm game at Grasshopper Manufacture and tells us that the user interface and playability of the genre still has far to go. "While music was something you just listened before," he says, "now with a videogame, the way it's enjoyed has changed."



SIMON FLESSER
Simon Flesser is a new name in the rhythm-action genre, having recently attracted attention with iOS's stealth-rhythm hybrid *Beat Sneak Bandit*. Like his genre mash-up, Flesser's opinion on the subject is mixed. "In theory, there is no real difference between a game like *Guitar Hero* or *Parappa*. I think there are way better variations of trying to make music into something visually explainable, instead of just falling tiles. *Gitaroo Man* and the *Ouendan* games, both from INiS, are games that do this in new and fun ways."



NEIL SORENS
"It's certainly sprouted in dozens of different directions and created some massively popular games," says Zen Studios creative director Neil Sorens. "But then, one day, what's worked for the last few years suddenly doesn't work anymore, and we have to come up with something new." Which perhaps explains why Sorens, a man more accustomed to creating pinball games, is now working on KickBeat, an unusual blend of rhythm-action and fighting game.



JAMES MIELKE
James Mielke is a perfect example of both music and game expert. After spending his youth controlling the mood of New York nightclubs as a DJ, Mielke now works at Q Entertainment, and recently selected and arranged the soundtrack to *Lumines: Electronic Symphony*. **"I tend to think we've hit a bit of a wall,"** where 95 per cent of the music games today are rote colour-bar note-tapping clones," he says. "There are still some interesting newcomers, but right now the genre is in a bit of a rut, which is one reason why publishers are cooling on the genre.



JAMES BARNARD
James Barnard is the creator of *Hiragana Pixel Party*, an iPhone game that uses rhythm teach Japanese. "There is now a multitude of different gameplay mechanics out there, from stuff like *Child Of Eden* and beat hazard shooters to *Groove Coaster* and *Pulse*," he says. "Even though instrument games are at death's door, who could have predicted something like *Rock Band* 15 years ago? The idea of the world's finest bands opening up their master tapes and allowing them to be made in to videogame content shows how much more credibility games now have."

"If Activision can fail with DJ Hero, maybe it's time for a rethink" James Mielke

No matter how much the rhythm-action genre may have evolved as it transitioned from 'Simon Says' *Parappa*-style games into the licensed music simulators of *Guitar Hero* and its offspring, James Mielke has a point. The *Rock Band* bubble has burst, and if the rhythm-action genre is to continue to survive then it has to evolve into something else once again. And part of that evolution, it seems, is going to come from a certain amount of cross breeding.

Look at the big music-based games of 2012 and many of them have blended rhythm mechanics with those of another genre. April's *Rhythm Thief & The Emperor's Treasure* coupled its rhythm-action minigames with *Professor Layton*-style adventuring, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy* turns the JRPG into a musical odyssey, while a vast number of indie games like *KickBeat*, *Hiragana Pixel Party* and *Beat Sneak Bandit* are taking the core gameplay of rhythm-action into some truly unexpected areas.

"It's the same progression that happens with every game genre," says *KickBeat* director Neil Sorens. "The reason it's happening with music games now is that the music genre hasn't been as heavily explored as some others, and with the popularity of band games fading, there's room for something new."

Is it possible that we're thinking of the rhythm-action genre in the wrong way, though? The genre-blending trend going on right now may not necessarily be a way to improve music games, but may actually be about using music to improve other genres. "I am not sure that people are setting out to blend music games with other genres; I think it's perhaps that they are thinking of ways that they can enhance gameplay by bringing music into the experience," suggests *Hiragana Pixel Party* creator James Barnard. He has a point. After all, almost everyone who buys his iPhone game will do so with the intention of learning Japanese – the rhythm element merely plays a part in helping that happen.

"Mihiro, the game's character, pops up and reads out some Japanese letters in time to the music, you must remember the rhythm and the sounds of the characters, and in the next bar you then have to repeat the phrase back at her, tapping the correct letters at the correct moments in the song," Barnard explains. "The twist is that she might read out the letters and show you them in English, and then you have to tap the equivalent Japanese character. Because the game engages you on lots of levels – memory, music, logic, reactions and timing – you don't even notice that you are learning."

***Beat Sneak Bandit* creator Simon Flesser agrees that music can be a great addition to a game designer's arsenal, outlining that his game idea was puzzle game first, rhythm game second.** "*Beat Sneak Bandit*'s puzzle design is extremely rigid. Music can take on many shapes, but theories of 4/4 beats and beats versus backbeats are also extremely rigid, and the principles it's built on just makes so much sense to base a puzzle game around.

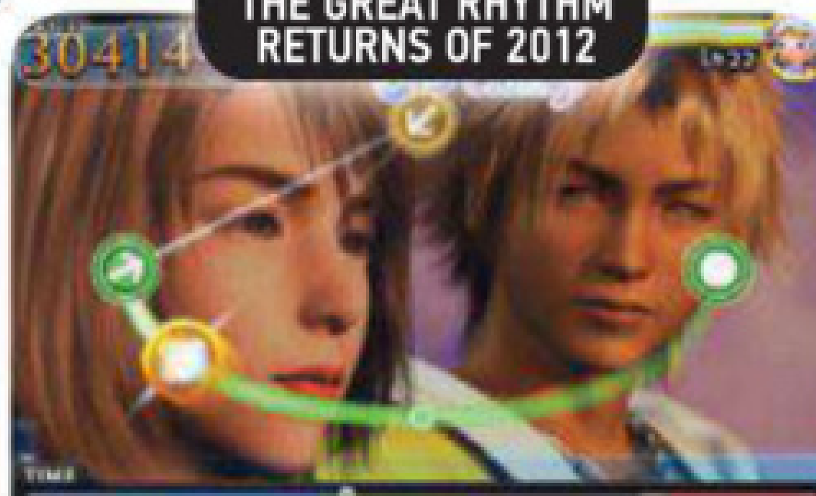
"I also think there is something with rhythm that sort of speaks directly to the brain," Flesser adds. "As a player you'll almost end up in this trance-like state when playing. There is something very interesting with using those constraints - You know the rules, but yet another part of your brain tells you to move and panic. It's almost seems like a brain exercise at moments - like your brain is enjoying itself."

One question this genre shift raises is whether we can now expect a move away from the licensed tracks of *Rock Band* and back toward original music made specifically for a videogame. Fans of *Parappa The Rapper* or *Paradise* will certainly attest to the fact that original music can work wonders for a



Masaya Matsuura tells us the secret to a good rhythm game is one "you can feel that you could actually touch the music directly". His Wii game *Major Minor's Majestic March* was an attempt to do just that.

ENCORE
THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012



1. THEATRHYTHM FINAL FANTASY

This 25th anniversary release celebrates *FF* by repositioning fan-favourite tunes in an RPG/rhythm-action hybrid with 3DS touch controls not unlike those of the *Ouendan* series. Originally planned for DS, it was moved to 3DS in order to squeeze in the incredible 70-strong tracklist. 50 more tunes are planned via DLC.

OUT: 6 July

ENCORE
THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012

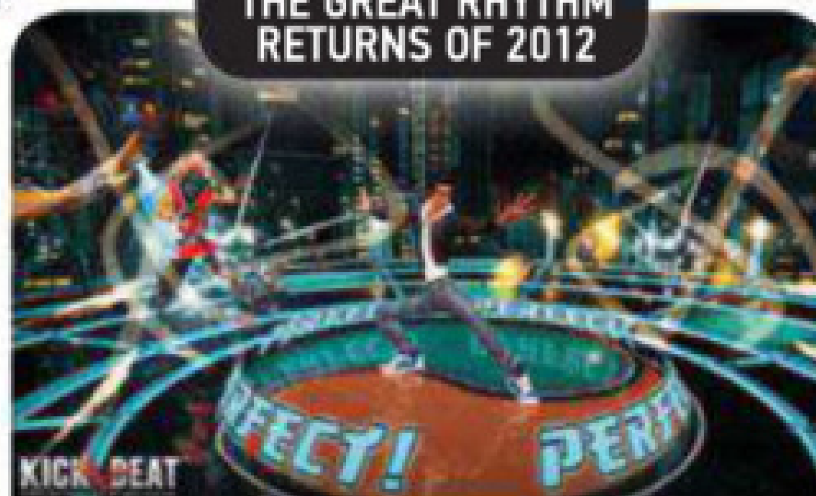


2. ORGARHYTHM

Created by Takashi Hirai (*Space Channel 5*, *Rez*) *Orgarhythm* is a PS Vita RTS that requires players to tap out different sorts of beats in order to initiate different attacks. As the battle grows, so too does the music, each new unit adding a new element to the soundtrack. Interestingly, US publisher XSEED is encouraging budding musicians to submit their own tunes to be used as DLC in the future.

OUT: TBA

ENCORE
THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012



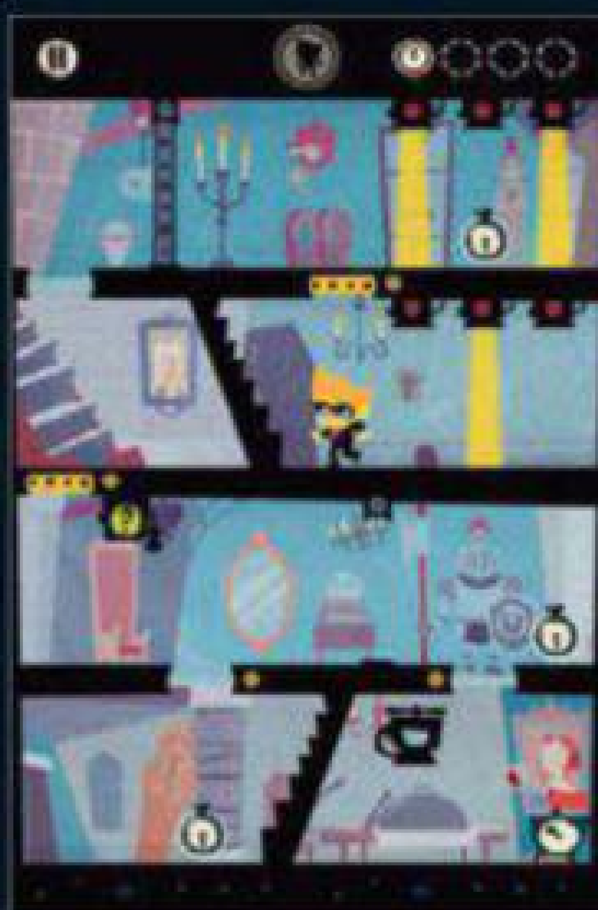
3. KICKBEAT

A fighting game in which player must match beats in order to pull off combos, *KickBeat* features licensed music but also allows players to import their own MP3s. "It works quite a bit like other beat matching games, except that animated 3D characters take the place of bars, arrows, icons, et cetera, in telling you when you're supposed to press the buttons," says director Neil Sorens. "And instead of the little indicator disappearing in a flash when you succeed, your character strikes the enemy character with a martial arts move."

OUT: 6 July

"With the popularity of band games fading, there's room for something new" Neil Sorens

"I'm surprised that genres that would make excellent rhythm games are so seldom used", says *Beat Sneak Bandit* creator Simon Flesser. "I'd definitely want to play a funk, soul or even a ska/ rocksteady rhythm game. A lot of James Brown songs would make excellent levels, for example."



rhythm-action game, though our panel of experts has mixed feelings on the issue.

"Good music does not equal good level design," argues Flesser. "The songs need to have a good design, just like levels need good design in a level-based game. I think that's a huge problem with music games with licensed music. Sure, Jimi Hendrix is awesome, but that doesn't mean that all of his songs will turn in to great levels. When making the music for *Beat Sneak Bandit* I soon realised that a lot of my loops were way too complex and had too many layers and stuff going on. I had to simplify them down, make all the beats very accentuated, so that they would harmonise with the levels and the gameplay system in itself."

"Composing specifically for a rhythm game allows you freedom," agrees Mielke, "the ability to write specifically to what sort of mood you're trying to create. But there is a trade-off, and that's not being able to use popular, licensed music. For *Lumines Electronic Symphony*, we weighed using all-original tracks with a smattering of licensed songs for sex appeal. But ultimately we decided to use all licensed tracks for maximum impact and recognition across all spectrums of dance music. It restricted us in so many ways, technically, though, as we were limited in how we could edit and arrange these tracks. With all original music we would have none of those issues."

Akira Yamaoka, however, rightfully reminds us that the choice of tune is nothing without good game design and execution. "Whether the game is fun or not is greatly affected by how the programmers and designers can use the music to make the game fun. For example, if the game system requires the player to press buttons, design it so that it is fun to press buttons. Even though some songs may have been created for a game, it doesn't necessarily mean that they work well with the game."

If a distinction can be made between licensed and original tracks it seems as though licensed music will remain the bread and butter of band and dancing games while more original works will require original tracks, with a exceptions such as *Lumines* and *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy*. These latter two games have more in common than you'd think, actually, and both use licensed tracks in less than obvious ways. The *Lumines* songs, for example, are arranged in such a way that the game becomes like an LP, with a deliberate emotional progression, while *Theatrhythm* takes songs written for previous *Final Fantasy* games and presents them in a new context that draws upon their emotional resonance.

Rhythm-action games have managed to touch players in ways other genres could only dream of. Just play *Gitaroo Man*'s 'Legendary Theme'

"I foresee games replacing or supplementing the traditional music video"
James Barnard

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THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012

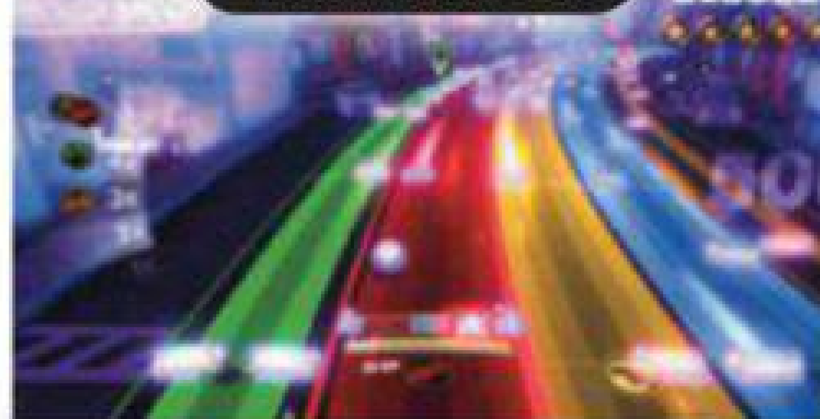


4. BEAT THE BEAT: RHYTHM PARADISE

Already reviewed in issue 121 of **games™** under its US name of *Rhythm Heaven Fever*, this is the long-awaited UK release of the rhythmic minigame collection from the WarioWare team. The wait is worth it, actually, as the UK release is the only version to feature both the English and Japanese soundtracks together on the same disc. It's the definitive version of the game.

OUT: 6 July

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THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012

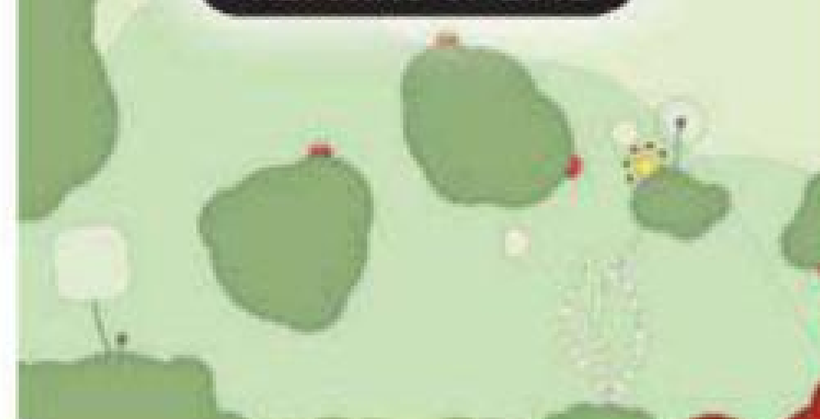


5. ROCK BAND BLITZ

A new Rock Band without plastic instruments sounds crazy, but it's another great way to play licensed music, going back to Harmonix's *Amplitude* and *Frequency* roots. "Right now they've said the game launches with 25 songs, but I am hoping the game uses the entire *Rock Band* library," says James Barnard. "So after you buy *Rock Band Blitz*, you have a brand new game to play with your *Rock Band* music library." Good news: it does exactly that!

OUT: 6 July

ENCORE
THE GREAT RHYTHM RETURNS OF 2012



6. SOUND SHAPES

When Masaya Matsuura talks about rhythm games making the process of creating music into a game, we can't help but think of Sound Shapes. Heading to PS Vita, courtesy of Everyday Shooter creator Jonathan Mak, this inventive game uses Vita's touch panels to arrange music emitting shapes on the screen until they form a tune you're happy with. The genius part is that these shapes then form the basis of equally musical platform game stages, which you can share with other Vita owners across the net. This is the future.

OUT: TBA



Though most Q Entertainment games are not rhythm-action, titles like *Lumines* and *Child Of Eden* borrow from the genre to enhance the player's mood.



Akira Yamoka worked on *Evangelion Sound Impact* at Grasshopper and says the secret to a good rhythm title is "to have players be immersed in the music and be part of that world completely."



Having made *Hiragana Pixel Party*, James Barnard has wacky ideas about the genre. "You could potentially make a music FPS, and if you did so you would want to use a mouse and keyboard," he suggests.

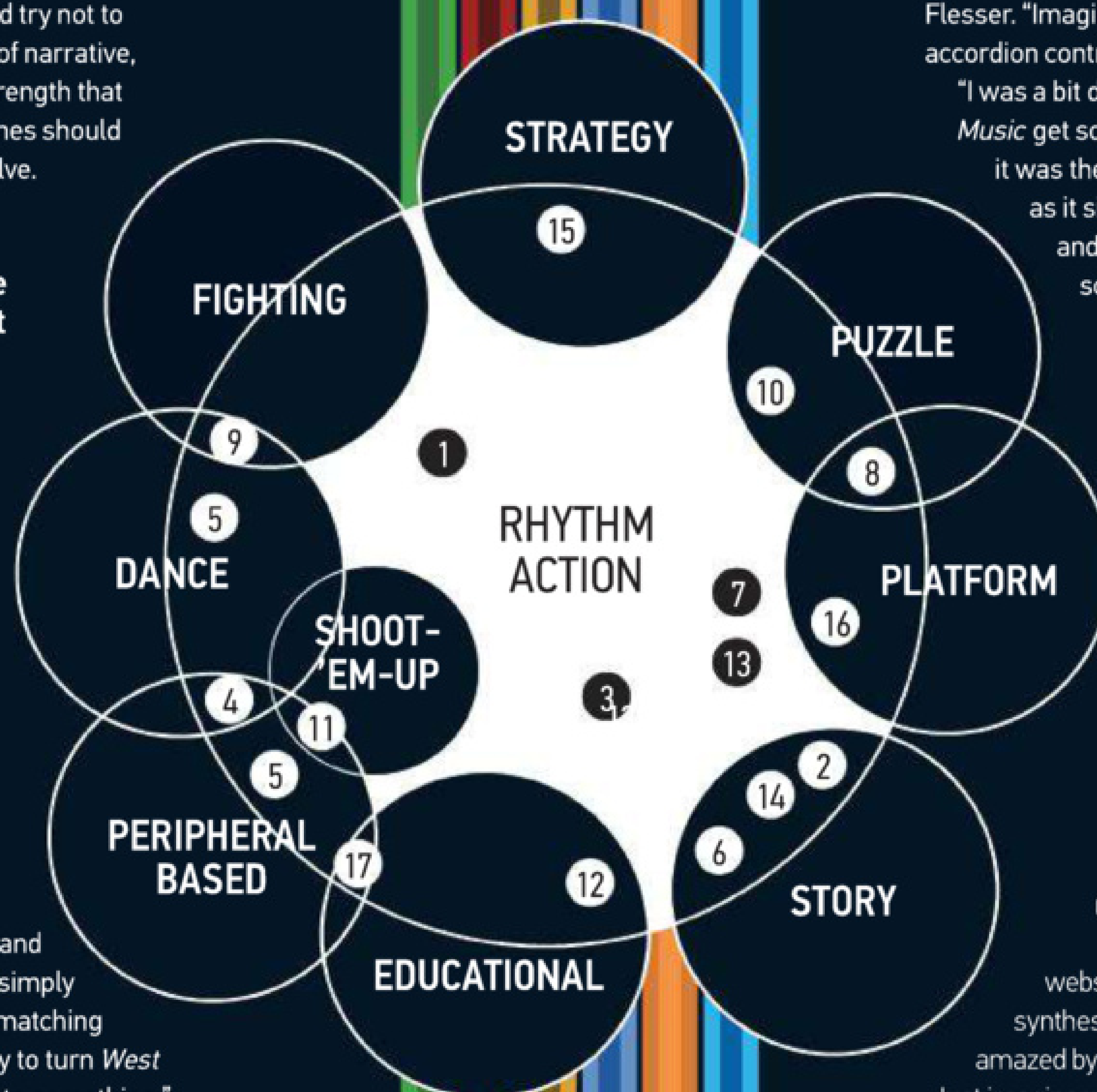
RHYTHM-ACTION MASH-UP

If rhythm-action is to survive it will do so by cross pollinating with other types of gaming. Here's how the current crop of music games does exactly that...

1 BEAT THE BEAT: RHYTHM PARADISE
2 RHYTHM THIEF & THE EMPEROR'S TREASURE
3 ROCK BAND BLITZ
4 DANCE CENTRAL 3
5 JUST DANCE 4
6 REBUILD OF EVANGELION: SOUND IMPACT
7 WINTA
8 BEAT SNEAK BANDIT
9 KICKBEAT
10 LUMINES: ELECTRONIC SYMPHONY
11 CHILD OF EDEN
12 HIRAGANA PIXEL PARTY
13 GROOVE COASTER
14 THEATRHYTHM FINAL FANTASY
15 ORGARMYTHM
16 SOUND SHAPES
17 ROCKSMITH



Kickbeat uses a mix of licensed tracks and original music, taking the best of both worlds for its rhythm-combat hybrid.



or *Ouendan*'s 'Over The Distance' and try not to be moved by their perfect marriage of narrative, music and interaction. This is one strength that rhythm-action and music based games should capitalise on as they continue to evolve.

This is only one possible future for the youngest of all game genres, of course, so we leave it to our panel to say where rhythm-action will go from here. "All over the place," answers Sorens. "Just as people get tired of a song when it's overplayed, they also want novelty in their music games."

"I foresee games replacing or supplementing the traditional music video or perhaps becoming another way to buy music," says Barnard, while Mielke adds: "Surely someone will find a way to innovate and do something more interesting that simply offering licensed music and button-matching routines. If someone could find a way to turn *West Side Story* into a game, it might lead to something."

"They should offer a completely new interface," says Flesser. "Imagine playing a game with a violin or an accordion controller!

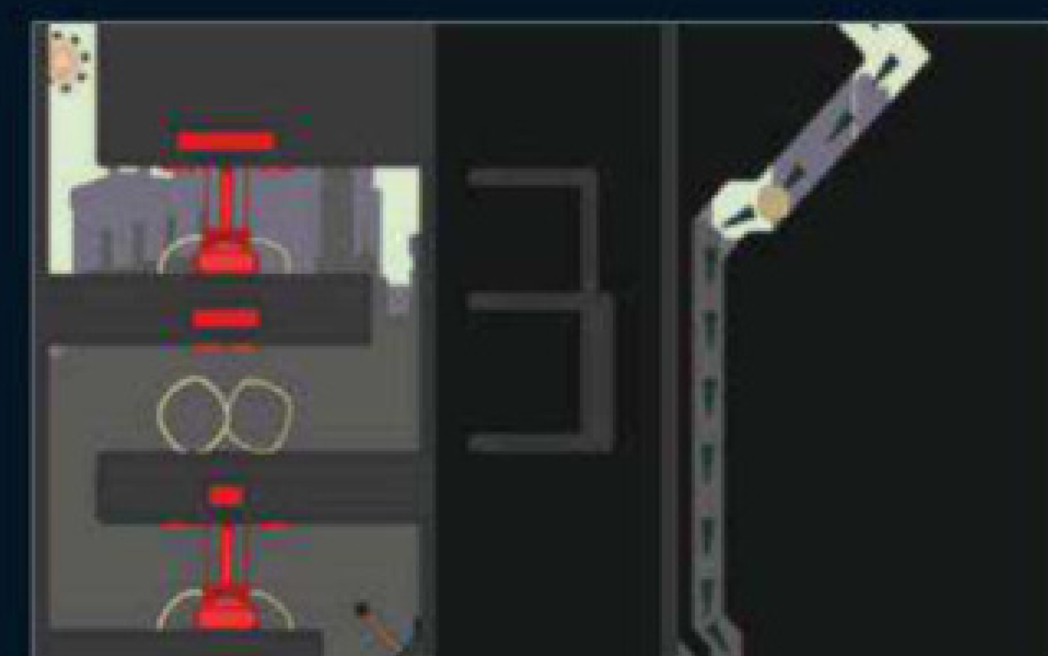
"I was a bit depressed to see a game like *Wii Music* get so much bashing," he continues. "To me it was the only true music game I've played as it simulated the joy of playing music and not just reacting to symbols on the screen. I would have loved to see that kind of direction being explored even more."

It's a sentiment that Masaya Matsuura agrees with, and as the father of the genre, it seems fitting that we give him the final word. "Thanks to the diffusion of devices like tablet terminals, utility apps which were once costly and specialised have become more common and accessible. Music games have traditionally used existing music, but it could be another possibility to make the 'process of music making' be a game.

"I was just playing on some website, where you can play the modular synthesizer," Matsuura concludes. "I'm still amazed by today's technology breakthroughs. Just imagine what I was doing in 1981 and compare it with now."



> "It could be a possibility to make the 'process of music making' be a game"
> **Masaya Matsuura**



Though *Sound Shapes* players piece together music from component sounds, those sounds are made by real composers, including electro musician Deadmau5.

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Reviews



92 Inversion

NAMCO BANDAI'S LONG-AWAITED THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER FINALLY TRIES TO CRACK THE MARKET



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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DON'T LOOK DOWN... WHICHEVER WAY DOWN IS

Gravity Rush

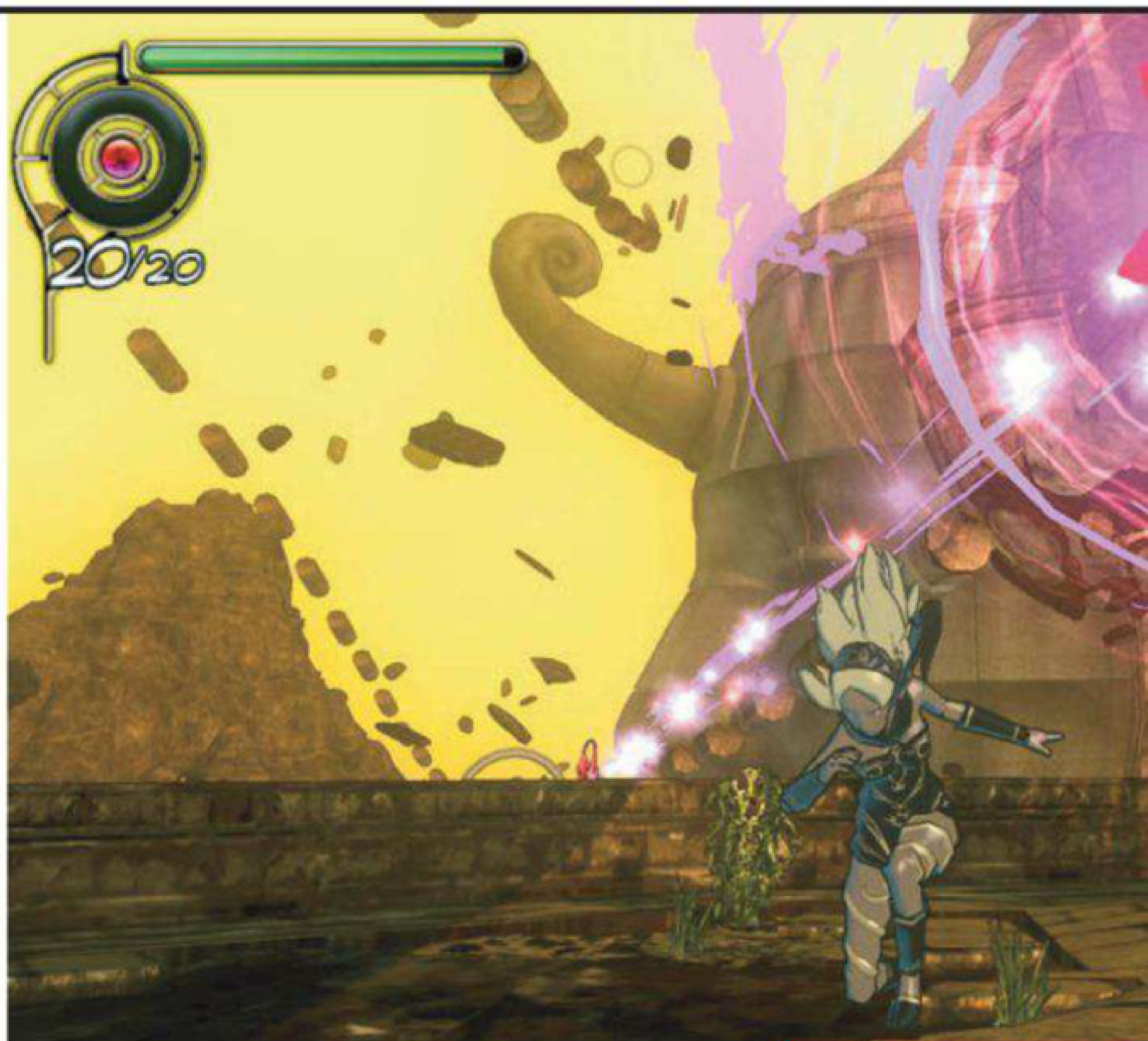
It's hard not to feel sorry for Vita. Sony's pint-sized powerhouse has so much going for it but, be it due to a nation's worth of moth-filled wallets or the rise of mobile gaming, nobody seems to be biting. It doesn't help that the App Store has changed the public perception of what portable gaming can and should be – between freemium diversions and great games that cost no more than a bag of crisps, paying full price for a handheld game has become an almost outrageous notion. But that simply shouldn't be the case. Vita's main selling point – and perhaps also the reason it hasn't taken off – is that it offers console-quality experiences on the move. Sometimes it'll fall shy, sure, and on those occasions we wouldn't dare deny anyone the opportunity to bitch about pricing. But when it delivers and you're left ogling that awesome screen, only the most ardent of cynics could be left feeling short-changed.

Oozing style, class and finesse like the hardware itself, *Gravity Rush* is the perfect poster game for Vita. Right from the clever opening sequence, it's clear that this is something really quite special, something that not only wouldn't be possible on any other mobile platform (at least to this standard) but also gives the majority of big-budget console titles a run for their money. If anything, it's a glorious feat of validation for all those that champion originality over everything else. It might not be the most technically adept game you'll ever play, but *Gravity Rush*'s core concept is strong enough to gloss over all bar the most frustrating mishaps.

The concept in question is that leading lady Kat can somehow bend gravity to her whim, which may sound baffling but it's as simple as tapping the Right Trigger once to start levitating and a second time (once you've lined up a target with either the right stick or the accelerometer) to define the new down. As such, what looks a lot like awkward flight is actually just controlled falling, but fortunately Kat is impervious to fall damage no matter the distance. Despite handy features like how Kat's hair and scarf will always point out the 'real' down and how there's a button dedicated to calling time on her powers to let physics take over, it's tough on the brain to begin with. But within a couple of hours, clumsy tumbles should have evolved into pinpoint multi-part flights, and it offers remarkable depth for such a simple mobility mechanic.

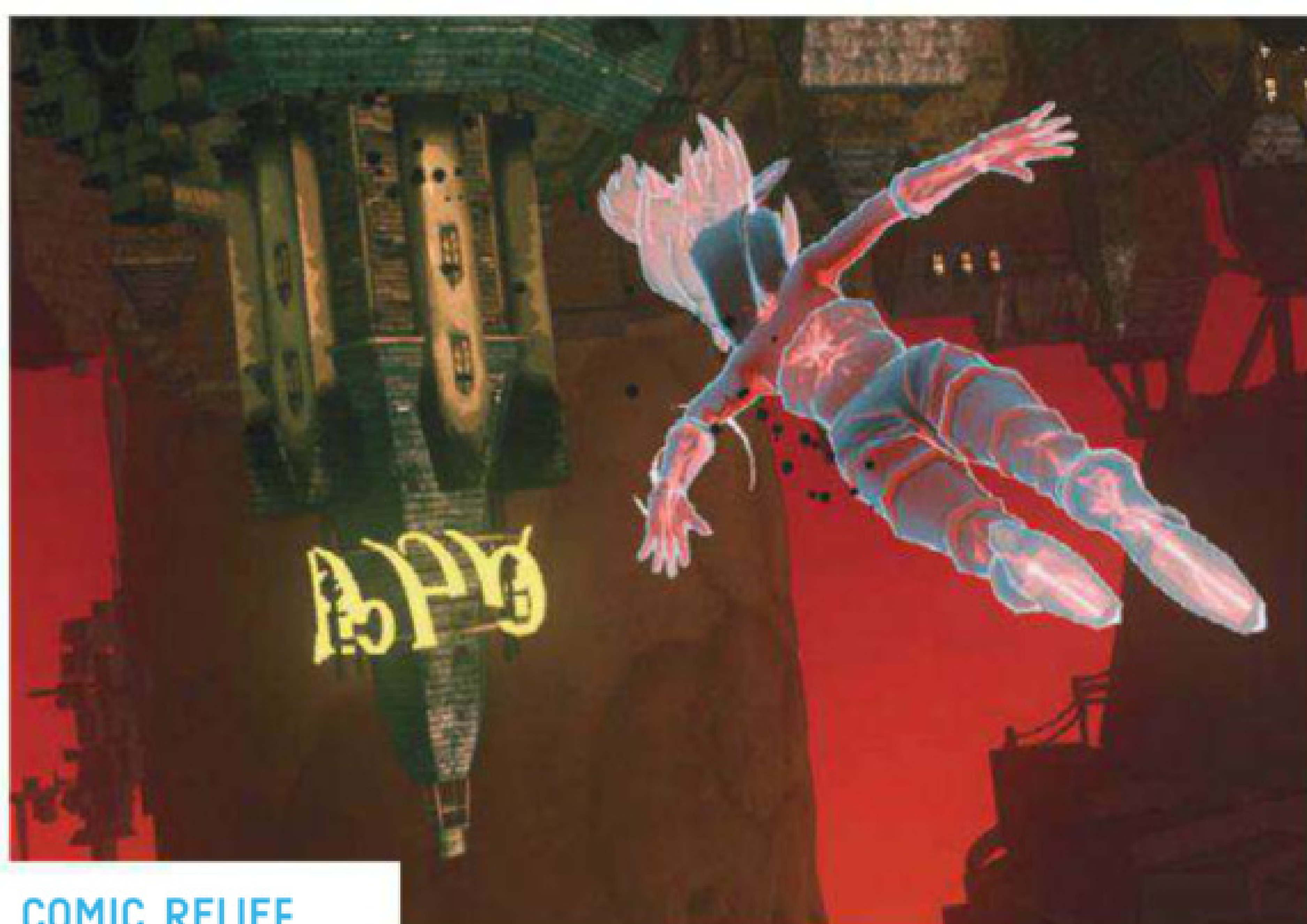
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Above: Kat's physics-bending powers seemingly come from her companion, a magical space cat called Dusty. The saddest part is that, somehow, there are worse backstories in both Marvel and DC's archives.... Right: As well as the ability to redefine up and down on the fly, Kat can also conjure up stasis bubbles with which to transport people and objects with her as she falls about the place.



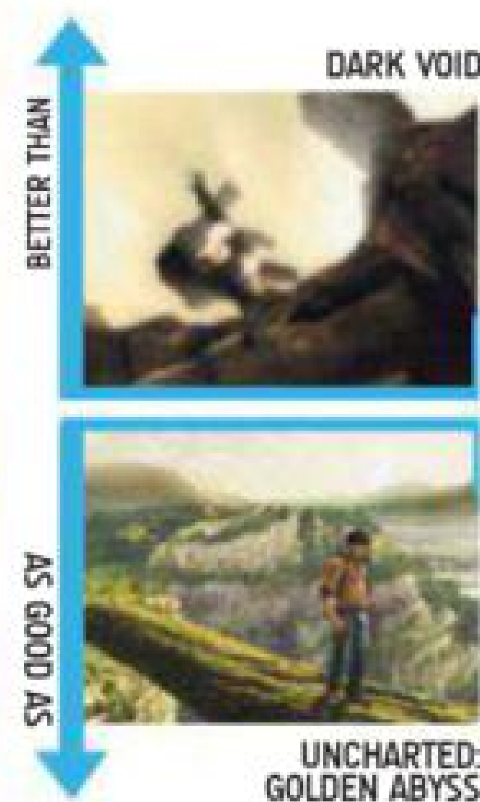
COMIC RELIEF

Gravity Rush is all kinds of pretty when you're exploring the floating steampunk craziness, and amazingly the production values hold steady even when Sony puts the rendering on hold for a little story time. Comic-inspired cut-scenes are rife in gaming, but often just feel lazy or like placeholder storyboards. Here, though, it's like flicking through a real interactive manga – multi-layered panels pan and shift as you tilt the handheld, with extreme motions even seeing previous or forthcoming frames bleeding into shot. Sound effects and lovely voice work, all in the game's own blend of gobbledygook, complete the package, and while it's far from the most original or amazing story ever told, the presentation just makes it feel that much more engaging.



BETTER THAN

DARK VOID



AS GOOD AS

UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS

Considerably shallower, especially in contrast, is the combat. It's largely a one-button affair that feels not entirely unlike *El Shaddai* in its rhythm and flow, but while Kat's default array of kicks can also be used in tandem with the gravity shifting mechanic, to say that it's not exactly the happiest of marriages would be quite the understatement – you can hear the arguments from the other end of the street.

The problem isn't so much that Kat's soaring dive kicks – which gain power with distance – don't work, because at times they do and, even with a degree of auto-tracking evident, they can still be hugely satisfying to land. The problem lies with the enemies; pretty much every one of them seems purpose-built to shut down this attack avenue. Some pull off cheeky last-minute dodges to send Kat soaring wide of her mark, others spam piddly projectiles to stop her in her tracks on all bar the shortest of dives, and later foes are ruder still, hiding away their weak points to more or less cripple the dive kick as a viable option. It could have been an awesome risk/reward mechanic, though the fact that most of the more powerful special moves unlocked as the game goes on are potent homing attacks is really quite telling.

Such issues can prove either more or less troublesome depending on how you see fit to level-up Kat's powers, mind. As in all good superhero games, there are a bunch of different abilities and traits into which to invest the gems you find littered about the stunning steampunk world, though a clever twist sees each of these capped based on Kat's confidence. As well as preventing builds that pour everything into one skill, this makes it easier to develop the skills you find yourself, and means you needn't worry about investing too heavily in great-looking talents that turn out to be worthless. Collectibles in open-world games often exist for no other reason than to be gathered up and artificially puff out completion times for the sake of a press release bullet point. Here, though, every adventurous tumble towards something shiny is rewarded with a noticeable improvement – be it improved hang time, more powerful strikes or an enhanced special attack – and this just makes exploring the gorgeous architecture all the more enjoyable.

And ultimately, that's what *Gravity Rush* is all about. Sony's latest is a quirky and surprisingly modest superhero origin story, the player learning about and mastering Kat's powers along with her, so it's only right that those powers should take the headline slot on the bill. There are nuggets of backstory littered about the place for those that want to delve deeper into the fiction, while those that just want to get on with things can instead try their hand at a fairly predictable array of races, challenges and arena battles between core missions. That none of these extra-curricular activities can stack up to the base thrill of simply lobbing Kat into the abyss and seeing where she might end up a few gravity shifts down the line is no slight on the optional stuff on offer, though – it's simply testament to the captivating power of so novel a central mechanic.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MOTION SICKNESS: While analog control is offered for guiding Kat mid-flight, the fact that the gyro controls are always on means you have to keep the Vita still, even when playing with traditional control.

FAQs

Q. WORTH BUYING A VITA FOR?

Almost. It's certainly the best original game on the system so far.

Q. IT'S NOT JUST A GIMMICK, THEN?

Not at all – touch and gyro controls are usually interchangeable with regular buttons.

Q. 'USUALLY'?

Yeah, the odd prompt or special move requires specific non-standard inputs, but it never detracts from the experience.

WITHIN A COUPLE OF HOURS, CLUMSY TUMBLES SHOULD HAVE EVOLVED INTO PINPOINT MULTI-PART FLIGHT







Above: *Gravity Rush* isn't just a visual feast; the eclectic soundtrack is ace as well, swerving from soaring orchestral melodies to upbeat swing beats as it sees fit. Left: Things get a little bit crazy once you leave the floating city, though the change of scenery certainly does the game no harm.

VERDICT 8/10
STYLISH, UNIQUE AND ESSENTIAL

THE STRONGEST GRAVITATIONAL PULL HERE IS THAT OF EPIC GAMES' SUCCESS

Inversion



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Saber Interactive
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: July
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-12 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

***Inversion* has a sparse tutorial of hint boxes and tips, but it doesn't really need them.** Upon seeing a block of cover you'll instinctively know to press A to hunker up behind it. If you want to break into a hunched roadie run you know to just hold it down. Pressing LT to aim and RT to fire feels as natural as walking, and by the time Terraformers burst out of the ground and spew out bulky, subterranean foes, the fact you need to throw a grenade down its mechanical throat to stop the advance of spawning enemies just seems par for the course.

Inversion stops short of borrowing *GOW*'s active reload, but by and large this is Epic's template lifted wholesale. The Lutadore enemies are chunky, muscular and hairless, speaking in a gruff pidgin English with only the odd verb distinguishable. There's one point when you get into something that no one could deny is a clear analogue of a Grindlift. The assault rifle has a large blade on the end – we can only imagine the conversations that must have gone on around the possibility of it being a chainsaw instead – and even the music that plays over the pause screen is reminiscent of *Gears*' ambient tones.

However, it's when *Inversion* does need a tutorial that things begin to diverge. *Inversion*'s central gimmick is the Gravlink, a fancy bit of sci-fi tech that enables supercop Davis Russel and his clichéd, foul-mouthed partner to shatter Newton's laws of motion. Use it when it's shining blue and you can create pockets of low gravity that hurl enemies up from out behind cover, or launch objects into the air that can then be grabbed and flung at foes, a la *Half-Life 2*. When it's burning red, the Gravlink intensifies gravity, which can be used to bring enemies to their knees or tear down hanging objects, creating new chunks of cover to hide behind when making a slow approach to a machine gun emplacement, for example.

The Gravlink is gradually upgraded throughout the narrative, and by the end its once-limited use is far less so, with players able to pick up and launch much larger objects, or even scoop up globules of lava and sling them at foes. However, the Gravlink's full potential is realised too late on in the game – the larger breadth of options should have been made available to the player in the first act rather than slowly dishing them out over the course of the game. It's a confused device too; Saber Interactive seemed to find difficulty in intuitively mapping the Gravlink powers to the pad. Confusing combinations involving the analogue stick and bumpers can be difficult to wrap your head around when boss battles often necessitate quick switching between offensive and defensive capabilities.

The other gravity-defying concepts encountered are similarly undercooked. Every so often, the ground will peel upwards beneath your feet and you'll be thrown into the air for a zero-g

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

YOUR TURN: Gravity-shifting is visual rather than mechanical, and controlled by the game rather than the player. If the world turning was implemented like some kind of third-person *Fez*, it would be a stronger USP.

Below: You'll play through some very similar boss battles throughout. The Slave Driver encounter, for instance, occurs on three separate occasions.







Right: If you're using high-gravity then a press of the right bumper will activate a shield of protective energy. It will slowly deplete the longer you're attacked, but can help you escape from otherwise tricky situations, adding an element of defence to the Gravlink's capabilities.

INVERSION STOPS SHORT OF BORROWING GEARS OF WAR'S ACTIVE RELOAD, BUT BY AND LARGE THIS IS EPIC'S TEMPLATE LIFTED WHOLESALE



Left: Many of the weapons have analogues to those in the *Gears* universe, like the Lancer and the Hammerburst, but slightly more imaginative weapons do appear later on, such as a lava-spewing hose and energy rifles that fire off fizzling blue sparks.



QUANTUM THEORY

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

GEARS OF WAR 3

FAQs

Q. IT'S CO-OP THEN?
Yes, and naturally that's the most fun way to play it.

Q. HOW'S THE AI WHEN PLAYING ALONE?
It generally minds its own business, but there are a few ways we'd like to see it improved.

Q. SUCH AS?
The ability to tell the AI which enemy to focus on would be helpful. It often ignored deadly threats nearby.



BUT STILL THEY COME

Early on, *Inversion*'s story shows promise. Earth has been invaded by a mysterious force known only as The Lutadore, who quickly overpower and enslave mankind with no explanation as to why they're there or what they want. *Inversion* doesn't explain your attackers' motivations for quite some time, creating an absorbing mystery around the origins of these invaders. When it finally does make the big reveal it's a hugely interesting and potentially unique concept, at least for a videogame. However, without spoiling anything, Saber never does anything useful with this narrative thread. It shows *where* the Lutadores have come from, but puts little effort into explaining why or how. The game ends not long after, leaving players with a compelling concept but disappointingly little done to expand upon it.



firefight. In a manner similar to *Dead Space* and *Dark Void*, players navigate these free-floating zones by gliding between highlighted sections of scenery. Early in the game these are little more than fancy looking platforming sections, but later they become *Inversion*'s action highlights. Vast caverns cluttered with suspended chunks of machinery and concrete become freeform cover shooter playgrounds, where crazy female Lutadores with lightsabers for hands swim and dive towards you at great speed, enforcing the need for constant movement. It's both thrilling and unique – the moments when *Inversion* most deviates from the *Gears Of War* template and actually starts to feel like its own game. Again, however, these moments are underdeveloped until the final third of the campaign, only truly realising their full potential during the final few hours of a story that lasts around ten.

Those moments spent walking on walls or ceilings aren't much better. Once or twice you'll find yourself fighting enemies upside-down on the ground below like some kind of Escher–meets–The Wachowskis action flick, or you'll turn a corner and be greeted by the sight of a street many storeys below, watching the tiny dots of enemies fighting it out on a different physical plane. It's fancy stuff, but completely scripted – you don't initiate this tumbling of the world, you simply step into vector shifts that jump you onto the next plane of the environment. It's not quite the ingenious level design we had hoped for.

None of this is to say that *Inversion* isn't worthy of praise. There's certainly plenty to criticise – poorly placed checkpoints, recycled boss battles, repetitive gameplay – but in terms of its use of Havok's physics engine and Saber's own Saber3D v.S2, there's a great deal to shout about. *Inversion* is, surprisingly, an incredibly polished and well-constructed action game; the physics are particularly impressive considering the gravity-shifting gameplay, with debris blasted out of walls and ceilings or even pearls of water floating into the air when a pocket of low-grav is created. And then there's the lighting, which is arguably the year's best so far. An early battle against a flying drone in an underground cave sees the enemy blinding you with long shafts of intense light that filter through the columns in the rock, while energy weapons gained later on will cause white-hot sparks to shower from enemies and cast long shadows across the meticulously detailed walls and ceilings. Early on in the game we even spent a minute just shooting a hanging lamp, watching the shadows from its spotted shade twist and turn across the walls. It's the kind of aesthetic effect that you forget how much you appreciate until you see it occurring so flawlessly in real-time.

If only the gameplay was as well realised as the engine that runs it, *Inversion* would be far more recommendable. Regrettably, as it stands, Saber Interactive has created a mechanically robust game, but one that doesn't do enough with the ideas it can lay claim to as its own. It's a solid and technically sound effort for sure, but *Inversion* is standing on the shoulders of giants, and their monolithic presence is felt more significantly under Saber's foundations than the ideas the developer come up with itself.

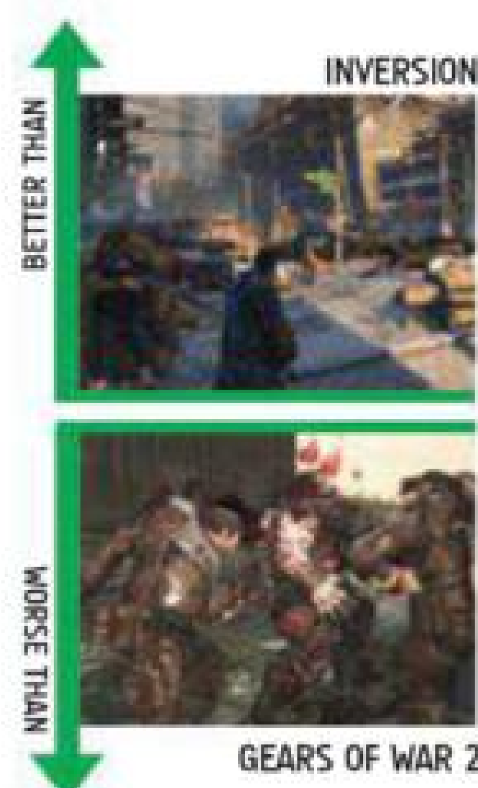
VERDICT 6/10
WON'T TURN THE THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER ON ITS HEAD

FRIENDLY FIRE… ISN'T

Spec Ops: The Line

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: 2K
DEVELOPER: Yager
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Five seconds into *Spec Ops: The Line*, and you're already thinking about ejecting it from the disc tray and tossing it into the pile of games with interesting premises that you bought but will never play, like *Timeshift* or *Dark Sector*. Opening with a playable how-to manual on creating the wrong impression, *Spec Ops'* first act is to subject players to a phenomenally boring on-rails helicopter section, and *then* the gall to have Nolan North and his dull, ubiquitous voice play the lead character. As first impressions go, it's a bit of a shocker.

It's also, thankfully, by and large out of step with the rest of the game. Give it time – and you'll want to, thanks to a gorgeous, ruined Dubai setting and the accompanying post-apocalyptic theme – and *Spec Ops* matures into something quite different. It's not often that third-person shooters (or first-person, for that matter) ask their players anything other than to press fire and not stop until Uncle Sam wins the day, but *Spec Ops* also asks some interesting questions. It even approaches 'thoughtful', of all things, amongst the killing and swearing and headshotting.

That opening out of the way, players take control of Nolan North's Walker and his two subordinates, Lugo and Adams. Walker is a Captain in the US Army, and along with your two charges you've got to size up the situation in sandstorm-ruined Dubai. Before long you're investigating rumours that a legendary US Colonel is holed up in the city, running his own rogue mission. John Konrad (subtle, Yager) is a decorated veteran with ties to Walker's past. At the outset of the game he's not yet to be terminated with extreme prejudice, but it isn't long before you're on a collision course with the Colonel like a fat kid falling off the wagon.

It's this conflict, along with the constant stream of Bruckheimer-style apocalyptica that has befallen Dubai (leading to some stunning, stark imagery) that elevates *Spec Ops* from a



Above: Just like its inspiration, *Spec Ops* features famous music to score some of its set-pieces. The choices are good, with the classic rock and Motown hits being particular highlights. We just wish the music didn't loop if you take too long to clear the area.

Below: Events become stranger as the mission progresses, with Walker's mental state fluctuating. His body too takes a battering: his face in particular becoming badly burned.



FAQs

Q. SHEESH. THAT TITLE, EH?
Yeah, it's not great. 'The Line' stands as a metaphor for the point where being a soldier meets inhumanity, or something.

Q. AND THE GAME?
Surprisingly complex, for its type. It certainly asks a few more difficult questions than your average cover shooter.

Q. IT'S NOT ALL SHOOTY-BANG-BANG?
Nope, and all the better for it.

Below: The grim tone of the game finds its apex in a white phosphorous attack on a supposedly hostile encampment. You can see you reflection in the remote monitor as you order the strike, a harsh reminder of responsibility when you see the horrific, cinder-singed aftermath.



AT ITS HEART IT'S STILL A SHOOTER, BUT AT LEAST IT'S ALSO ONE WITH THE BRAINS TO ASK YOU TO SHOOT SOMETHING DIFFERENT

so-so shooter into an intriguing experience. At its core, there's nothing to celebrate, over and above a solid shooting system and satisfying mechanics. *Spec Ops* doesn't try and reinvent anything, and we're absolutely fine with that: it has its eyes on other prizes.

With this solid – and let's face it, *Gears Of War*-inspired – base the game is free to focus on its true hook, which is storytelling in both the visual and narrative senses. As with the gameplay, it has a clear and identifiable inspiration and doesn't try to hide it. Again, Yager chose well: *Heart Of Darkness* (well, more *Apocalypse Now*). Where most shooters simply pit players against aliens or communists (and there's no difference really) *Spec Ops* turns American friendlies against each other as Walker's recon force finds itself at odds with Konrad's praetorian guard, with both sides going slightly more insane as the hours tick by.

It enables Yager to plot its set-pieces less around rousing action sequences and more the disheartening realities of war. Walker, Adams and Lugo start off as a bunch of merry men, bantering their way through the mission, but before long they – in an allegory for the American forces at war with each other – soon come to bitter disagreements regarding the direction of their task. Walker believes that Konrad has gone crazy, is actively harming the remaining citizens of Dubai by ordering them to stay put. Konrad believes that escape is impossible. And as for the CIA agents inserted into the mix by a nervous US government, it's safe to say they're not to be trusted.

As the team proceed further 'upriver', to Konrad's command post in Dubai's tallest building, things disintegrate further: rules of engagement are questioned, civilians are killed, moral choices are made, and the narrator becomes increasingly unreliable. It's a welcome change from the gung-ho grunting of the norm, and although some tonal mismatches are present (brutally executing so-called friendlies is starkly 'gamey' next to the narrative) it's enough to lure players in and keep them interested.

As are the environments this all plays out against. The cover-and-fire, two-guns-and-grenades system may be familiar, but Dubai is a great locale, filled with exotic technology, architecture and largesse all mixed up in the wash by the sandstorms that wrecked the city.

Visually, it's one of the best backdrops we've seen for a long, long time, the surreal environment matching that of the story; seeing gigantic yachts beached in the middle of nowhere is striking, and that's just one example of many that Yager implement very well indeed, keeping the battleground fresh. It's not the most polished game out there: the cover system is sometimes janky, checkpointing can be a little aggravating at times, any time you're in a vehicle you'll want to kill yourself more than Konrad, and the ending could be considered one trope over the line. But these are irritations, and pale when considered against the whole.

There was a time when we thought that *Spec Ops: The Line* wasn't going to make it out of development hell, or that it would simply drift off into the land of vapourware, to spend its time hanging out with *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and the like. We're very glad it didn't, and that 2K gave Yager the time and money it needed to finish the project.

It's not particularly new or innovative in its core mechanics, but it marries the dependable and familiar with the not-so to create one of the year's most interesting titles. At its heart (of darkness) it's still a shooter, but at least it's also one with the brains to ask you to shoot something different.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SUN, SAND, SADNESS: The Arab metropolis makes for a nice change of scenery, and the choice of combatants is a similar departure from the expected bad guys. Just don't expect a (direct) sequel.

SQUAD UP

One seemingly glaring omission from the *Spec Ops* package is co-operative campaign multiplayer. Play through the single-player for any amount of time, however, and it becomes clear that there's no way it could work, thanks to the heavy story emphasis. Regardless, two-player co-op *is* coming, with 2K promising "four fast-paced missions, each with its own unique objectives, environments and playable characters" as DLC in the near future. On the competitive side, *Spec Ops* boasts everything you'd expect in the post-*Call Of Duty* world. The MP features rankings, upgrades and special abilities for each side to use, as well as Yager's own take on objective-based game modes. Well, that's what the press release says, anyway: we couldn't get it to work on our pre-release code.



VERDICT 8/10
A CUT-AND-PASTE ABOVE THE AVERAGE GEARS CLONE

BY THE NUMBERS

Heroes Of Ruin

There are few games that play it safer than *Heroes Of Ruin.* So much so that even those looking for a most traditional of fantasy loot-'em-ups may well be surprised by the lengths to which it goes to conform to expectation.

There are four character classes available, fitting the four different play styles typical to the genre. Vindicators are warrior types – sword swingers clad in heavy tank garb. Gunslingers are your ranged class – medium-armoured and nimble, they like to stay outside of scuffles and shoot in as much as possible. Savages have low defensive capabilities, but hit very, very hard indeed. And finally, there is the Alchitect – typical mage class; low armour, devastating area of effect spells.

Heroes Of Ruin is set in the World Of Veil. At its heart is the Nexus. Here are gathered quest-giving NPCs and shops to sell junk to and buy useful items from, and it is from here that you are able to unlock the various sets of dungeons constituting the game's main questing locations. The structure of the gameplay never really changes from the first moment you arrive in the Nexus: gather a bunch of quests, upgrade your weapons and armour and head off to the newly unlocked dungeon, repeat.

While there is some variety to be found in quest types, these again fail to defy expectation, and we found ourselves often craving something – anything – to happen which might show a spark of originality. Alas, everything always breaks down to 'kill ten of these', 'gather five of these', or 'kill this boss or that'. None of which is in any way helped by the fact that each set of three or four dungeons (linked by their own sub-stories) are ocean, forest, snow, and so on. And while they may appear different, they are structured very similarly. Flowers that can be

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: n-Space
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Below: Mobs comprise your typical cannon fodder enemies, naturally, but to break things up, *Heroes Of Ruin* regularly throws in the odd named sub-bosses here and there, like this red hammerhead shark guy.





ITS IMPLEMENTATION AND USE OF THE TOUCH SCREEN IS DISTINCTLY LACKING IN USER FRIENDLINESS, GRAPHICAL FINESSE AND ORIGINAL THINKING



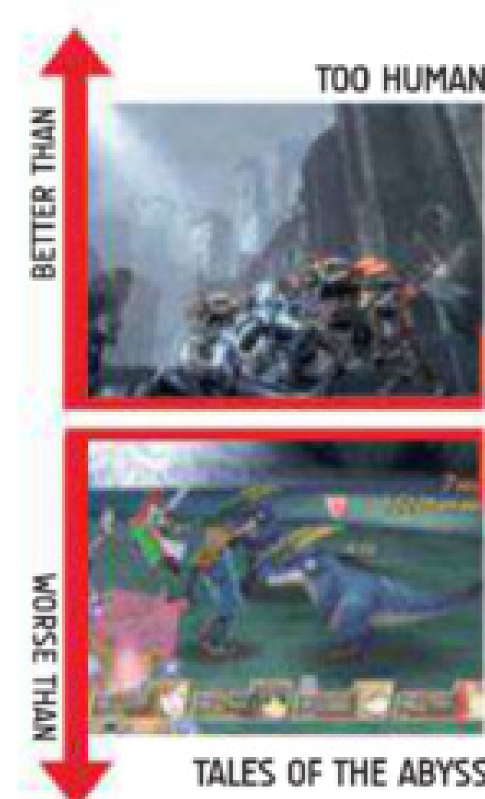


Left: Special attacks are various, but there are far too few of them with which to pull something original out of the bag and impress your friends, and to us that's kind of the point.



BETTER THAN

TOO HUMAN



WORSE THAN

TALES OF THE ABYSS



Left: The problem with theming things in such an unimaginative fashion - snow, forest, purple netherworld, and so on - is that it all feels just that little bit too familiar, especially since each object of interest within it is a like-for-like reskin job.



A RARE GENRE

It's a sad fact that, including *Heroes Of Ruin*, there are only three RPGs available for the 3DS. A small number, you might say, but playing anything of this size and length quickly makes clear the problem. By around the sixth or seventh hour with the game, our hands had become withered, aching talons, creaking and complaining with the strain of having to move that thumbstick one more time. In an RPG, several consecutive hours of play should be expected, and though n-Space has provided ample opportunity to stop whenever you like - Weystones sprinkled liberally throughout each dungeon acting as autosave points - it's just not the kind of experience that bears up well when playing in short stints of an hour or less.

hit and looted in the forest dungeons are replaced by similarly purposed ice formations in the snowy realms, or shells in the ocean dungeons. The various locales and their themes, then, feel like the exact same experience reskinned, rather than as if any attempt has been made to imaginatively use their own unique properties.

Also, even down to the individual clusters of dungeons, there is a great deal of repetition. Rather than a *Lego*-like approach to dungeon design in which tiny pieces are configured and reconfigured to ensure each part is unique, instead large, recognisable prefab sections are repeated over and over, lending the experience an unsatisfying and unerring sense of déjà vu.

Levelling up, obviously, leads to increases in base stats, and *Heroes Of Ruin* offers you the chance to get stuck in and decide which of your three primary base stats you wish to upgrade. For our Vindicator-class character, we decided his most important base stat was Might – how hard he hits things, essentially – and so consistently ploughed all of our upgrade points into this particular statistic. But that manufactured a new problem. By around level 15 or 16, our Might statistic was so high that most creatures we encountered died within one or two hits. We had eradicated all challenge.

As well as putting points into base stats, it's also possible to steadily upgrade your character's special attacks. For our Vindicator, these comprised a powerful overhead strike, the ability to imbue our weapon with fire, a charge attack and a passive damage enhancer. Each special ability has three levels to upgrade with points accumulated from levelling up. Since, however, each can only be upgraded upon your character reaching a specific level, there was never a shortage of points to do this. Putting control of this into the player's hands, then, felt a little, well, pointless.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

3D, YES: The 3D effect is eye-popping. So much so you'll need to turn it off from time to time.
OVERPOWERED: You can overpower your character to the point where the game becomes silly-easy.

There is also a fairly fundamental problem that is less one of the game, but one of the device, exacerbated by the lengthy play times *Heroes Of Ruin* encourages. The 3DS becomes quite an uncomfortable object to hold over periods of several hours. And then there's the 3D screen. While we found ourselves mesmerised early on with *Heroes Of Ruin*'s 3D dungeons, its columns and plinths that seemed almost to poke us in the eye as we passed by them, eventually they led to eyestrain – a discomforting, dull ache which finally forced us to switch the 3D off entirely.

Heroes Of Ruin's approach to equipment and upgrades seems at first a rather odd one. Rather than have icons pointing to each equipment slot, we have what is really just a large list that must be scrolled through, items selected based on the way they affect the many stats shown on the top screen. Its implementation and use of the touch screen is distinctly lacking in user friendliness, graphical finesse and original thinking.

From a multiplayer perspective, things fare better. The game uses both StreetPass and SpotPass. Furthermore, as well as support for four players both local and online, you can also trade loot using the 'Trader's Network'. The best way to enjoy *Heroes Of Ruin* is most definitely with three friends, but to highlight this as a selling point would be to assume there are going to be people out there with three friends who also own the game, and that will get together and plough hours at a time into it. Realistically, this will rarely happen, and as a single-player looter, *Heroes Of Ruin*, fairly enjoyable though it is, fails to show the invention necessary to justify its own existence.

VERDICT 6/10

DOESN'T QUITE DO ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY ITS EXISTENCE



THE TIDES OF DESTINY ARE EBBING AWAY

Rune Factory: Oceans

Above: Though she's trapped in the male protagonist's body, the female lead can still be heard by other characters. Any comedic potential this unusual idea has is unfortunately thwarted by a weak script and woeful voice acting.

Rarely has a spin-off series managed to better its inspiration, but Rune Factory's marriage of farming and dungeon-crawling made it a more compelling proposition than any of the apparently endless iterations of *Harvest Moon*. Sadly, it seems the series may have peaked with the excellent *Rune Factory: Frontier*; by comparison, Rune Factory: *Oceans* is a disappointing step backwards, blighted by a number of strange changes that suggest its custodians have fundamentally misunderstood the franchise's central appeal.

Initially, its change of setting is a welcome one: ignore the silly conceit that sees both male and female protagonists inhabiting the same body, and you'll find much to like in the idyllic village hub. The bright, welcoming look of this pseudo-Mediterranean hamlet just about compensates for the poor texture work and rudimentary 3D models that make it clear this is simply an up-rezzed version of the (overseas-only) Wii version. Meanwhile, the early game suggests a seaborne adventure in the vein of *The Wind Waker*, with fresh islands to uncover and explore. That you do so atop a giant golem, capable of fighting off sea monsters, only heightens the anticipation.

Sadly, none of this lives up to the promise. Each island varies only slightly from the last, and finding them involves little more than heading towards an X on the map, entirely removing the thrill of discovery. Sea combat, meanwhile, is as appealing as watching two tired heavyweights listlessly trading punches in the twelfth round.

Not that its land-based equivalent is much better; repeated stabs of the attack button with the occasional tactical retreat to heal are enough to dispose of any enemy, large or small. It's more entertaining to coax them into servitude by taming them with your brush and having them fight alongside you, or have them tending your crops on the four seasonal islands while you venture into deeper waters.

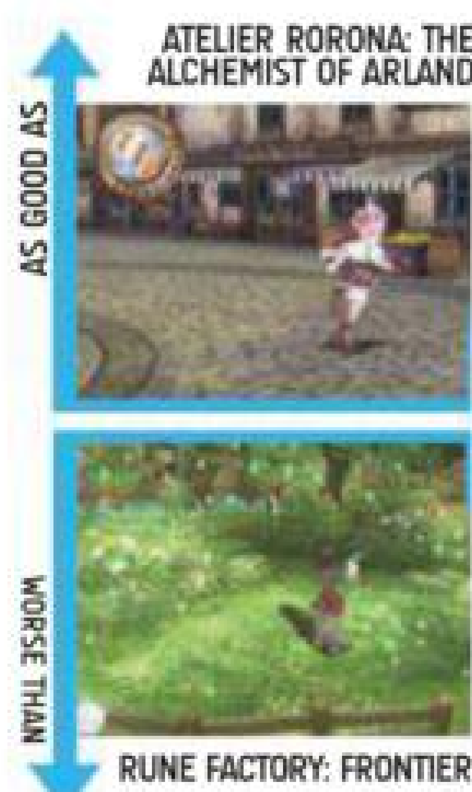
Your team of monstrous helpers are very efficient; indeed, your involvement is little more than a brief spell sprinkling seeds with a magic wand and then ensuring your creatures are well-fed in your absence. The aim is evidently to reduce busywork, but the upshot is that there's little sense of achievement. Remove the labour and you take away the series' raison d'etre: through effort and care come the richest rewards. As a result, *Oceans* often feels inconsequential.

Such a shift in focus would be understandable if there was enough elsewhere to fill the gaps, but even the relationship elements are stymied, firstly by poor voice work and latterly, the limitations imposed by its split-personality setup. That you can't play as the female lead until you've finished the game is just one of a number of unfathomable decisions. Though at times it offers glimpses at what could have been, it's a bitter irony that this adventure on the high seas should end up floundering in the shallows.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
OTHER FORMATS: Wii (US/JPN only)
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Neverland
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: ATELIER RORONA: THE ALCHEMIST OF ARLAND



WORSE THAN: RUNE FACTORY: FRONTIER

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PRIDE IN BATTLE: Given the weapon variety and the streamlining elsewhere, there's no excuse for *Oceans'* underdeveloped combat. If Neverland wants to focus on harming over farming, it needs stronger fight mechanics.

VERDICT 5/10
MISSING THE CHARM OF THE FARM



Above: Fishing is a worthwhile pastime, though more for the purposes of recipe-making as earning an income. There are quicker and easier ways of making money in *Oceans*.



Right: Pushing a snowball slowly. That's what *Sonic*'s all about.





GAG THE FANS, PLEASE

Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode II

Remember when George Lucas gave fans exactly what they wanted by finally showing Jedi master Yoda fighting in the prime of his life? It didn't work out that well, did it? Sonic Team could have learned a thing or two from that. Such was the small but oh-so-vocal outcry over the physics in *Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode I* that Sonic Team held off the release of its sequel until moving Sonic around felt exactly as his fans remember.

Has the developer achieved that goal? Well it has, actually. Even in a full 3D engine, Sonic zips along and turns on a sixpence just like he's on the Mega Drive. But at what expense? The quality of the level design in *Episode II* suggests that so much time was spent getting the controls and handling right that everyone forgot about good old-fashioned game design and playability. In fact, the level design in *Sonic 4: Episode II* is some of the most atrocious to feature in any *Sonic* game to date.

Far from the imagination on offer in *Episode I*, this collection of levels is defined by its ability to alternate between predictable autopilot rollercoaster paths, unforeseeable bottomless pits, instant death traps and frustrating underwater sections with virtually nothing resembling fun in between. But hey, at least the physics are good. Thanks, fanboys!

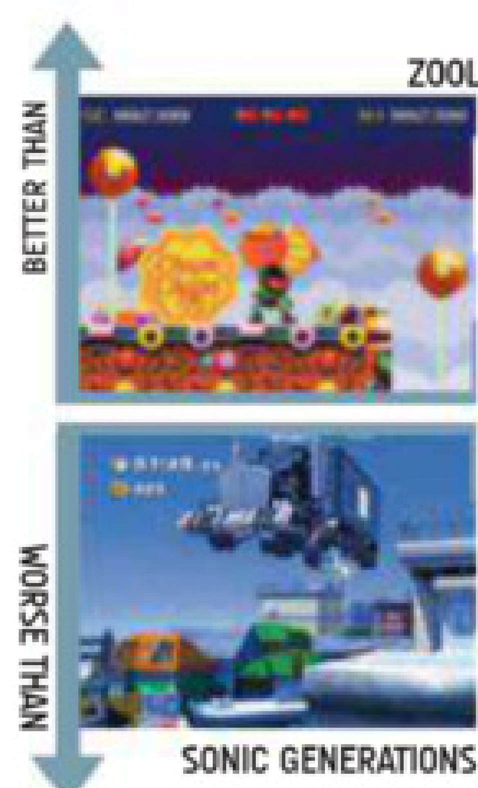
You do have to admire Sonic Team for trying, at least. As a tribute to *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, the reintroduction of the half-pipe bonus stages is more than welcome, but the implementation of Tails doesn't quite work as intended. In *Sonic 2* he was a fairly useless, but nevertheless popular, sidekick. In *Episode II*, Sonic Team has tried hard to find a use for him. With a press of the team-up button he can carry Sonic upwards, or hold onto him to form a huge, devastating spiky ball, and many of the levels and bosses are designed around exploiting these abilities. Unfortunately, none of them actually make the game more fun. Most are difficult to the point of trial and error and all do their best to detract from the purity of the Sonic experience. You have to admire the developer for trying but it's just one of those ideas that's best left on paper.

There's no doubt that you'll find a lot of praise for *Episode II* out there, since it addresses the physics issues with the first episode so well, but **games™** can't honestly recommend a game so under-developed on quality controls alone. Sonic Team recently said that it's unsure whether to create an *Episode III* or not... Perhaps that is the developer's opportunity to marry decent physics with great level design, but after the previous two episodes we're in serious danger of losing interest before that happens.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android, PC, PlayStation 3, Windows Phone 7, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sonic Team
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — ZOOL



WORSE THAN — SONIC GENERATIONS

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SUPER SONIC BORING: Remember when *Sonic The Hedgehog* levels didn't just alternate between unengaging and utterly annoying? Those were the good old days. Recapture them or die, Sonic.





VERDICT 4/10
TO BE THIS GOOD DOESN'T TAKE LONG

A SONG OF ICE AND DIRE

Game Of Thrones

By their very nature, all role-playing games are ambitious: vast landscapes to explore, thousands of interactive characters and quests that between them have the power to swallow entire weeks of a player's life. *Game Of Thrones* has all this to live up to and much more besides.

Of course, half of the legwork has already been done for developer Cyanide. George R.R. Martin's revered series of fantasy literacy has intricately crafted a world of such vivid mythology and grandeur that for a developer to stumble over the lore would be nigh-impossible. A small amount of praise should go to the French studio, then, for managing to at least evoke the tone of the source material, introducing new characters Mors Westford (a ranger based on the frozen Wall in the north) and Alester Sarwyck, (a priest returning home) that fit snugly alongside the established canon.

With some interesting twists and turns throughout, knowledge of the series isn't essential for newcomers, but it is certainly encouraged if you want to get the most out of Cyanid's side-story. Interactions with recognisable characters and known locations aren't fleshed out enough to aid those unfamiliar with Martin's work, and the budgetary constraints are keenly felt in the uninspiring design decisions.

Indeed, it's really no surprise that the licence itself is the game's double-edged sword. Sticking close to the narrative structure of the source material involves the action switching between two protagonists at either side of the land of Westeros. While it's a neat thematic trick, the juxtaposition of the two disparate locations, narratives and drastically contrasting characters is ultimately jarring to both plot and gameplay.

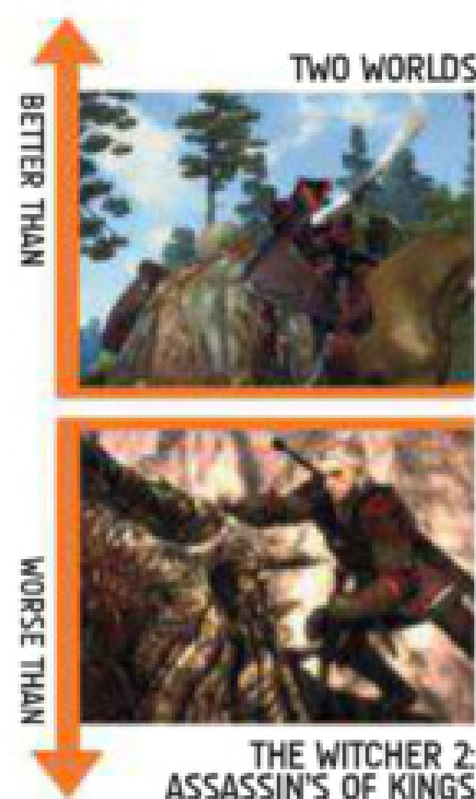
Both points are compounded by woeful voice acting – featuring disinterested turns from both the cast of the TV show and some game-only newcomers – and a relentless linearity, scuppering any chance of true immersion into the mystical land. Add to these woes the lack of true role-playing features – side-quests are uncommon and inconsequential (with usually a singular objective extended through checkpoints during each chapter) and players fast travel between locations rather than being given the free rein to explore the wilderness – and it calls into question why Cyanide opted to sculpt an RPG as lightweight as this.

Yet it's the implementation of some standard genre staples that proves the most damning. Combat here is the game at its most pedestrian, feeding players a variety of abilities with only a few proving useful. There's also an option for slowing down time, enabling the player to plan attacks and switch between characters, which adds welcome strategy but ultimately proves monotonous, with clunky animations including a singular coup de grâce recycled to tedium.

By journey's end, it's only the intriguing story that manages to hold the player's attention. Indeed, this is a deeply flawed and overly ambitious attempt for a developer unable to grasp the genre basics. Its only real triumph is that, as a piece of *Game Of Thrones* fiction, it doesn't betray the heart of Martin's original vision.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Cyanide
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

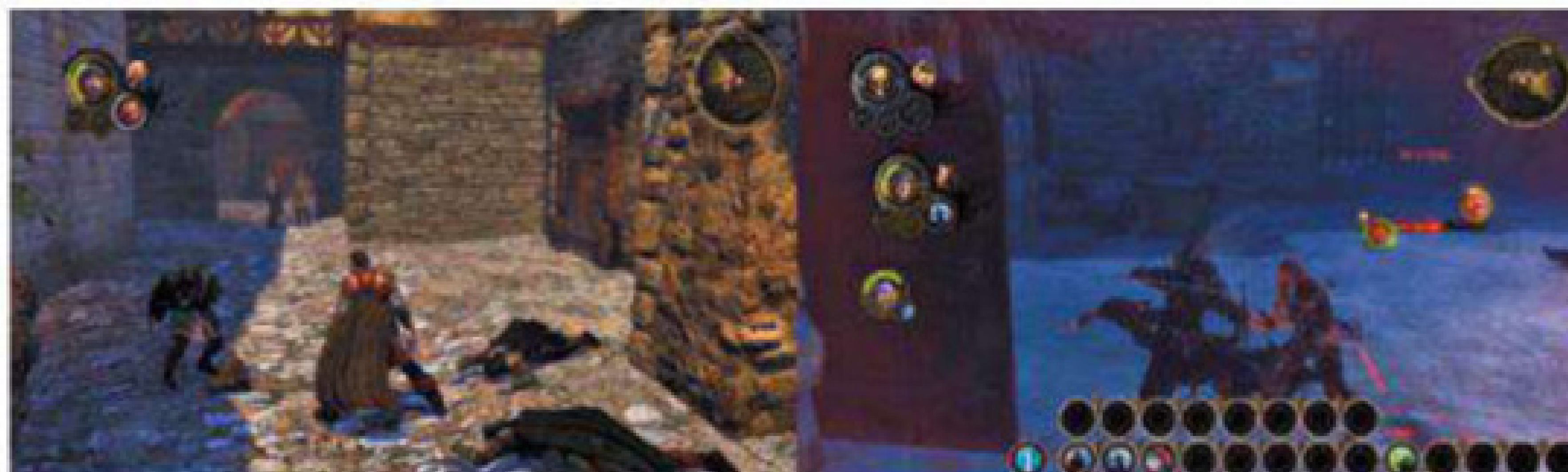


MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FREE SPIRIT: If characters were able to explore the realm freely without fast travelling between locations, it would more effectively invest players in the fiction.

Below: Slowing down combat to perfectly strategise each party member's actions is a well-implemented concept, bogged down by clunky animations and overlong skirmishes with each encountered enemy.



VERDICT 4/10

A GAME OF AMBITION MARRED BY POOR EXECUTION



Above: Mormont is one of the few characters portrayed by the actor from the show. Nevertheless, the game's dialogue is consistently read with all the gusto of a mortified schoolchild forced to dictate a poem at the front of class.



HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

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START

HAVE YOU SEEN STAR WARS?

STUPID QUESTION

NO

END

DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?

YES. YES. YES

NAH. IT WAS GREEDO

DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?

YES I DO

BELIEVE IN WHAT?

WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?

NATURALLY

A WHAT-KAMPFF?

WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?

IPAD

ZIGGY

KIDS

IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?

DESKS

LOTTERY PREDICTION?

DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42

OF COURSE

THEY SMELL A BIT?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?

SURE

HAVEN'T A CLUE

WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?

OMNI CONSUMER PRODUCTS

NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE

WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?

FLUX CAPACITOR

NOTHING

UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?

ADAMANTIUM

UNOBTAINIUM

DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?

NEVER

YEP

HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?

NOT LIKE THAT

LIKE THAT

WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?

VIMTO

NO IDEA

WHO IS HAL JORDAN?

PAINT IT?

HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?

WITH PEOPLE

WHERE IS BABYLON 4?

DUNNO

LOST IN TIME

VISITORS. OR VENDETTA. WHICHEVER

EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT...

SUNDAY TIMES SUPPLEMENT?

FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?

ARE YOU MENTAL?

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?

JUDGMENT DAY

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?

UPPER?

WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?

M

YES

CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?

ISN'T THAT A VAMPIRE?

A PARTY?

SURE CAN'T

SURE CAN

SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

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THE SOCIAL WETWORK

Ghost Recon Commander

Though its marketing campaign as a proper Facebook game for gamers might not necessarily be accurate, there's no denying that the IP behind *Ghost Recon Commander* and its development studio – headed by industry legends John Romero and Brenda Brathwaite – brings it the sort of hardcore credentials lacking in other social games.

In the first few hours at least, *Commander* lives up to that promise. Its mix of base building and squad-based missions paint it as a fun cross between *Cannon Fodder* and *XCOM*, and those opening missions spent taking out enemies, retrieving loot and rescuing hostages has all the fun and addiction of a real game that just happens to be running in your browser.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Facebook
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Loot Drop
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: Don't have any real friends? You can still hire AI bots to help you out.



Above: *GRC* is certainly one of the most graphically impressive games on Facebook. Your bandwidth pays for it though.

Though billed as a turn-based game, *GRC* is more of a slow-paced RTS with strict line-of-sight mechanics. Players have to be wary of the threats around them but can stay out of trouble with clever positioning – great for those moments when your internet connection starts to sputter. The whole game is controlled by simple mouse clicks – just move the cursor over an enemy and click to kill, with player statistics governing the chance of critical hits or head shots. As well as basic shots, players can draw on a range of grenades to help take out multiple targets at once, and can also shoot at nearby crates and cars to cause more explosions – a particularly satisfying tactic. Experience points are earned from kills, of course, but there are lots of optional critters, such as snakes and chickens that reward extra EXP if you track down and shoot them.

It's not all about shooting, either. Other objectives include the safe escort of rescued hostages or the retrieval of key contraband or intelligence, meaning that thorough exploration of each stage is a must. With the camera focused in close and most levels designed with multiple routes, choke points or tense corners, you never know what's coming up next, which makes such exploration interesting enough to compel you forwards.

Integration of certain social gaming conventions doesn't necessarily hurt *Ghost Recon* either. It's good fun to hire members of your friends list for each mission, and fairly rewarding when they do the same – your use by a friend granting a monetary reward among other treats. Best of all, when an enemy is killed he showers the screen with cash and experience points that need to be vacuumed up by scrubbing the mouse pointer over them. It's not something that could ever be described as a 'game mechanic' but there's no denying the casino-like rush that comes from scooping up all that shiny experience at once.

It's this addictive distribution of ego-strokers that can potentially make social games so insidious, as players are rewarded

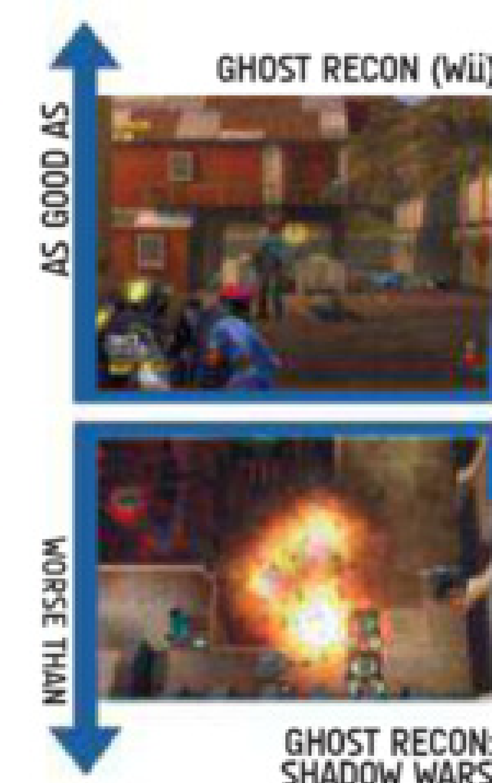


Right: As you can see, if you want to buy the most useful equipment then you're going to have to spend some real money.



EVEN THE THRIFTIEST OF RESOURCE MANAGERS WILL RUN OUT OF BULLETS AROUND FOUR MISSIONS IN





FAQs

Q. HOW MANY MISSIONS?
Eleven are available at the time of writing, and each one has three difficulty levels.

Q. SO IT'S LONG?
Oh yes. On content alone there's a lot to do, and then the ammo issues and base building increase longevity even more.

Q. BASE BUILDING?
Yes. You can buy lots of kit for your base. Some bits are just cosmetic, while others give you more health, accuracy, et cetera…

BETA WITH TIME

At the time of review, *Ghost Recon Commander* was still in its beta phase – albeit still playable by anyone in the public who wishes to give it a try – and a number of improvements are promised to arrive later in the year. A few bugs have already been eliminated in the short period of time since launch, while the developer is using Facebook itself to get players to report more problems. While it's suggested that the minimum system requirements will be reduced with time, it's unclear whether the microtransaction system will be changed. A currently greyed-out button named 'Earn Skulls' suggests that some sort of change is planned for the future, however.



for doing very little then asked for real money in order to continue the experience. *Ghost Recon Commander* handles this better than most, but skirts very close to unfair levels. Completing missions on the default setting is certainly easy, but it does require a modicum of strategy at least. Rushing into a crowded room is less sensible than splitting up your squad and hugging cover, for example. Where *Commander* prefers to inject difficulty is through the artificial means of limiting ammo. Even the thriftiest of resource managers will run out of bullets around four missions in, and are then encouraged to buy more to continue. 20 extra bullets costs seven Skulls (*GRC*'s in-game premium currency), which in turn can be acquired through play but at such a slow rate that it makes more sense to buy them. Sadly, Skulls can only be bought by the hundred, and cost 50 Facebucks, which is £3.23 in real money. This unnecessary layering of exchange rates alone is enough to make the system feel grubby to the point where most would prefer to just pay a flat fee for the game in the first place – or just not play it at all.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MONEY: Microtransactions can be handled in ways that don't annoy players but *Commander* doesn't quite get it right. Throttling the use of ammo is a cheap trick that spoils an otherwise decent strategy game.

Thankfully, ammo does replenish by itself over a certain period of time, so those who don't want to pay for the Facebook currency (in order to buy Skulls, in order to buy bullets) can just go away and do something else while the ammo counter ticks back up to the maximum level over the course of a few days. That maximum level defaults at fifty bullets, however, so it's only another mission or so until you're left deciding whether to pay or wait again.

As a freemium game, *Ghost Recon Commander* naturally needs to generate some sort of income for its creators, but limiting ammo is not the best way to do that if a developer wants to retain an audience. Driving up the difficulty to encourage the sale of tactical equipment would be one way to do that, as would the sale of cosmetic items for both character and base. *Commander* uses both of these revenue streams already, so there's no reason that a change to the system couldn't be made in the future. Then we can all get back to enjoying what is an otherwise fun and engaging *Ghost Recon* spin-off.

Ghost Recon Commander doesn't quite shake off the trappings of gold rush-era social games, then, but at least the quality of the game itself is a step in the right direction. This isn't the game to attract the hardcore away from their Xboxes, but those who already spend a lot of their time on Facebook will find it to be one of the best in-app videogames available to them.

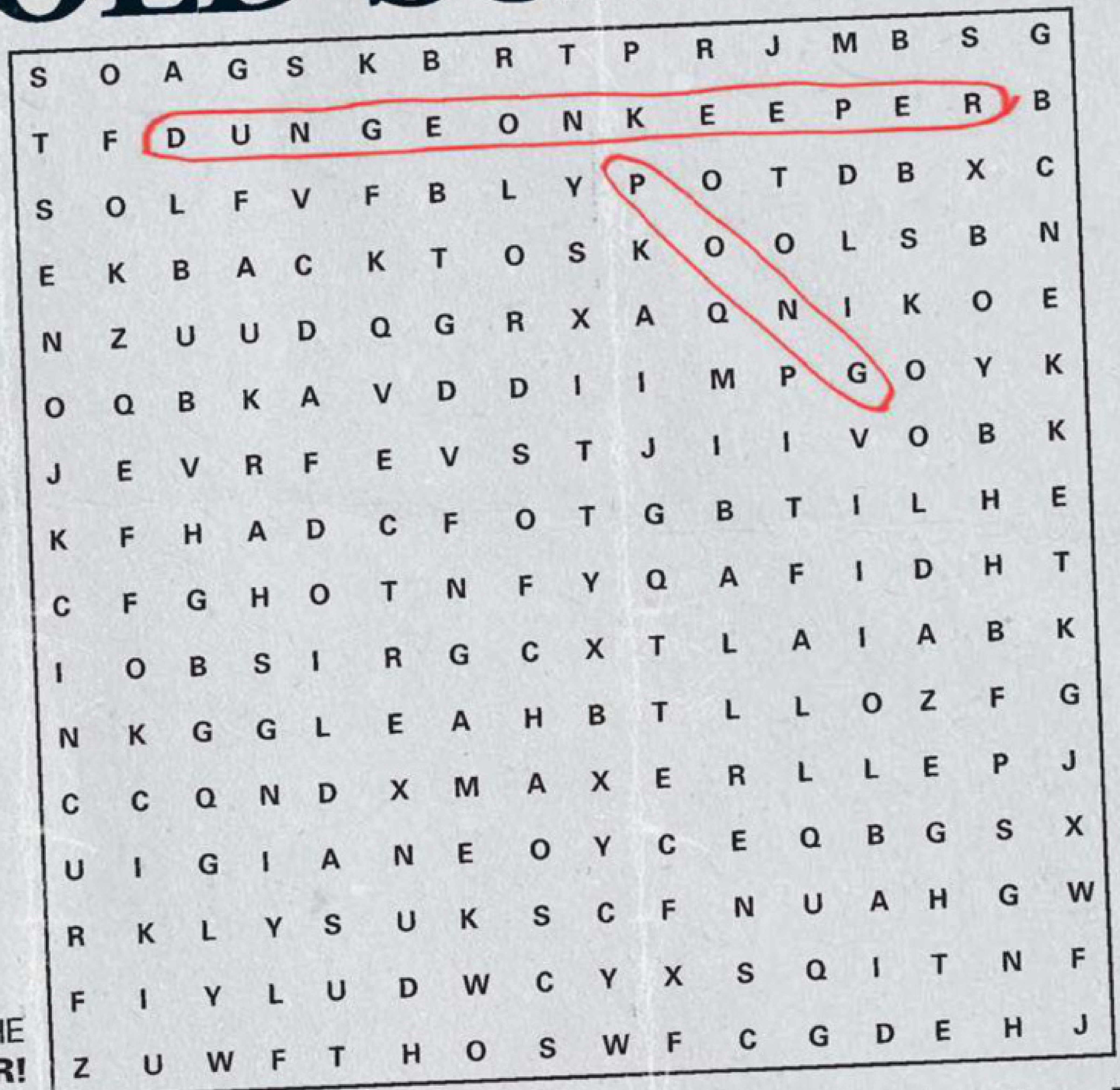
VERDICT 6/10
WORTH IT, IF YOU LIVE ON FACEBOOK

LIKE YOUR GAMING TO BE OLD-SCHOOL?

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1. ~~PONG~~
2. ~~DUNGEON KEEPER~~
3. TEKKEN
4. KICK OFF
5. PITFALL
6. BACK TO SKOOL
7. SKOOL DAZE
8. CONTACT SAM CRUISE
9. VECTREX
10. GAME CUBE
11. IBALL
12. LORDS OF CHAOS
13. FLYING SHARK
14. DIABLO III
15. NICK JONES

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Below: Charging up your attacks is an integral part of *Blazing Souls Accelate*'s combat system; combos are a must if you want to score big on experience points.





SUBLIME SWANSONG OR A VENTURE BEST FORGOTTEN? RISING STAR GAMES BRING US ONE LAST SRPG FOR THE AGEING PSP

Blazing Souls Accelate

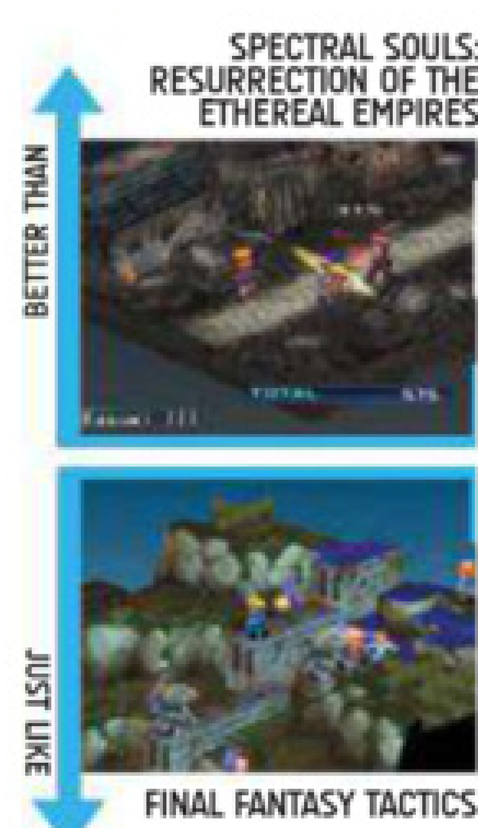
During its considerable lifespan, the Sony PlayStation Portable has been blessed with a seemingly endless procession of top quality Japanese strategy-RPGs; titles like *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Disgaea* and *Jeanne d'Arc* have endeared the handheld to dedicated fans of the genre. Unfortunately, as is often the case, this increased popularity has resulted in a raft of mediocre offerings from developers simply looking to grab some reflected glory. It is into this latter category that *Blazing Souls Accelate* sadly falls.

Originally released in Japan way back in 2009, *Accelate* is actually a port of a pre-existing PlayStation 2 release from three years prior to that date. While age is certainly no reason to dismiss a game – the aforementioned *Final Fantasy Tactics* is well over a decade old and still fantastic – *Blazing Souls Accelate* gives you plenty of other excuses to pass it by.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSP
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 2, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Idea Factory
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SPECTRAL SOULS: RESURRECTION OF THE ETHEREAL EMPIRES



JUST LIKE
FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

Like *Spectral Souls* – another Idea Factory SRPG for the PSP – *Blazing Souls Accelate* delights its needlessly convoluted battle system. Ultimate success is achieved through some protracted combo attacks and 'charging' your character's power into a killer assault. While the chain of moves looks spectacular – especially when your register an devastating 'Overkill' finale – the system never really flows as it should. *Disgaea* boasts a similar chaining mechanic, but it's handled with more grace by the experts at Nippon Ichi than it is here.

Another annoyance is the way in which the game world is explored and expanded. Instead of showing you potential battle locations, you have to task your characters with finding them. Success here is largely down to the current skill level of your team, and the process consumes 'Work Points', a commodity which seems to continually be in short supply throughout the entire game. It's a sadistic mechanic which serves no other purpose than to make the player's life a misery, and in extreme cases can even result in the you becoming hopelessly stuck, forcing a complete restart.

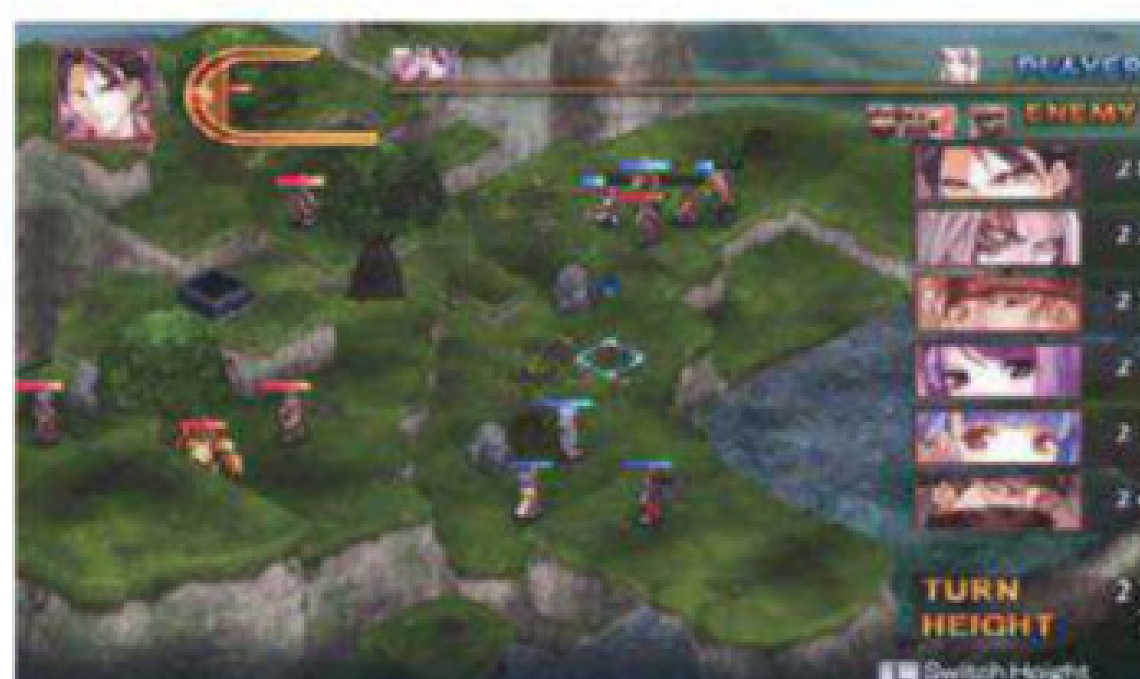
SYNTHESIS
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

UPHILL BATTLE: Although it's not entirely successful, *Accelate* does make some attempt to fuse gameplay styles to offer something different. Some locations can be manipulated or explored prior to combat, puzzle-style.

When you factor in *Blazing Souls Accelate*'s other glaring shortcomings – which include astonishingly unlikeable characters, needlessly crude dialogue, terrible tutorial features and a mostly obnoxious guitar-based soundtrack – you're left with few convincing reasons to pick this over the multitude of SRPGs already available on the PSP.

If you're a manic SRPG aficionado and you've already exhausted all other options – something which is quite plausible, given the late release of this game in the PSP's lifespan – then it's possible that you could extract a modicum of enjoyment from *Blazing Souls Accelate*. Just don't expect it to be a fitting send-off for Sony's veteran portable, or match the high level of quality already witnessed on the system.





VERDICT 4/10
A FRUSTRATINGLY OBTUSE TACTICAL ROLE-PLAYING TITLE



Left: The License Trials ask you to accomplish a number of tasks – throw opponents six times, block ten times, and so on – but they don't make up for the absence of a meaty single-player mode

DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK

Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown

Here it is. A little late but finally here nevertheless. Sega was unlucky in that *Virtua Fighter 5* hit shelves before Street *Fighter IV* helped reignite the embers of fighting games, but frustratingly remained static when the genre roared back to life, with *Final Showdown* only appearing in Japanese arcades. It's taken almost two years for it to make the trip to consoles, but Sega has made enough changes since *Final Showdown*'s arcade bow that it doesn't show any signs of age.

Two fresh faces join the roster – Taka and Jean – while the old crew have been overhauled to the point where familiar tactics have been rendered obsolete. This isn't just a case of Sega adjusting minor details, but one of going so far as to adding new moves while changing the inputs and properties of old moves too. Few examples: Sarah's throws have switched from Flamingo stance to her previously weak Step stance, while Vanessa has a new stance where she lays on the floor, with options to taunt, hit throw or roll to safety. No-one has escaped Sega's overhaul.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: AM-2
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2

BETTER THAN: TEKKEN 6



WORSE THAN: VIRTUA FIGHTER 4: EVOLUTION

The system has also been tweaked. Attacking from the side has been buffed up, while hitting evade attempts rewards you with a counter-hit, so there is higher risk and higher reward for evading. In the meantime, throw clash and zero-frame throws have been removed, so attacking through suspected throw attempts becomes a viable option for defending players. The end result is that the pace is higher and favours the attacker. Along with the new moves, *Final Showdown* looks and feels stylish, something *Virtua Fighter 5* struggled to pull off.

Concessions have been made for this downloadable release and customisation has taken the biggest hit. To limbo under the memory limit, all items are DLC-only, so you don't even see customised opponents without snapping up the extra content. An understandable quirk, perhaps, but no less frustrating for it. It also means single-player feels dry, relying on its License Trials to give the title legs outside of Versus modes. Likewise, while the reputation of *Virtua Fighter 4: Evo*'s training mode grows with each fighter released that fails to support new players, *Final Showdown* falls in line towards the latter trend.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BIGGER, BETTER: The main changes are a bigger risk/reward associated with evades and that throws have reverted back to *VF4*'s system, so learning defensive techniques isn't quite as important now.

It's fortunate, then, that the netcode is strong enough to encourage sustained online play. The title doesn't do enough to highlight the strides *Final Showdown* has taken for the series – particularly for PS3 owners, stuck with Ver.B of *Virtua Fighter 5* as opposed to Xbox 360's later release of Version C – but it's a still complicated, technical beast of a fighting game, and more than ever worth the effort of learning.

VERDICT 8/10
THE BEST DOWNLOADABLE FIGHTING GAME YET



Above: *Virtua Fighter 5* had stellar netcode and that has carried over to *Final Showdown*, even though the online modes themselves are threadbare.



QUAD DAMAGE

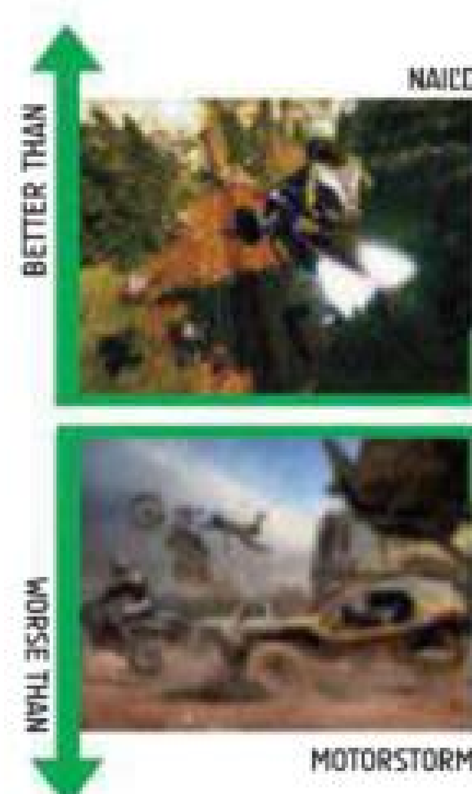
Mad Riders



Above: It's not the best-looking game in the world, but it rattles along at a ludicrous speed and throws in stomach-churning drops with almost no warning. And with 45 tracks to plough through, it's a sizeable effort too.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Techland
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Good old Techland. The perennial underdog developer from the chilly climes of Ostrów Wielkopolski, Poland, has been playing by its own rules for years. Its output has varied drastically, from the ambitiously loveable *Dead Island* to the heinous crime that is *Call Of Juarez: The Cartel*, and it even has its own proprietary tech, the wonderfully wonky Chrome Engine.

Continuing its trend of marching to the beat of its own drum, Techland's latest is *Mad Riders*, a sequel of sorts to 2010's *Nail'd*, and an entirely unfashionable arcade quad-bike racer available – in the company's own words – for the same price as a Pizza. It's hard not to root for Techland. Especially considering *Mad Riders* is actually pretty bloody good.

For the price, it's outstandingly complete. 45 tracks, 12-player online, tonnes of quads to choose from... it could have easily been a retail game. A retail game that wouldn't have sold, but a retail game nonetheless. And as it's so cheap and easily accessible, it makes its flaws less upsetting.



CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

FOUR WHEEL LIVE: *Mad Riders* offers a surprisingly robust online suite, with up to 12 competing players and in-game notifications during single-player events.

Most of the action sees you tearing over huge hills and off enormous jumps at breakneck speeds, trying to stay on course and on your seat. While the engine is a little ugly and the undulating tracks somewhat nauseating, the sense of speed is absolutely fantastic. Techland doesn't care for the laws of physics, so you can steer your quad in mid-air, flipping it like a maniac in the process, and when you get into a flow it's genuinely exhilarating. As long as you go in realising it's not the most polished and fine-tuned of beasts, you shouldn't be disappointed.

The single-player career is split up into fairly typical modes, ranging from straight races to stunt challenges, checkpoint battles and time trials, but all manage to capture a sense of aggression and urgency. Battling for first place against the AI is a tussle even in the early races, with a real back-and-forth struggle all the way to the finish line.

As is the standard for this sort of thing, doing tricks gives you boost, and said boost is the best way to exit from a drift. It's not exactly *Forza*, but *Mad Riders*' throwabout handling does the job. There are tokens littered across each track, too, most of which add to your boost bar, but some that let you open shortcuts, *Split/Second*-style. And they're accompanied by a voiceover that sounds like Roman Bellic doing an American accent, which is always good.

Mad Riders might not have the class of *Motorstorm* or the visuals of *Pure*, but at 800 Microsoft Points it's an absolute steal, and a great indication of where downloadable console games are going. Better than pizza then? Definitely. Unless it's got a hot dog in the crust.



Above: *Mad Riders* is extremely similar to the underrated *Nail'd*, but ditches the motorbikes in favour of a quad-only society. The colour palette has been broadened too, escaping the brown monotony of its predecessor.

VERDICT 7/10
A FOUR-WHEELED STEAL



While *Deponia* has only three main locations, each has a distinct look and time shifts from daylight to dusk to night as Rufus crosses the cluttered countryside. Plus a weird German guy serenades you as you reach each new landmark.

NOT AS CRAP AS IT LOOKS

Deponia

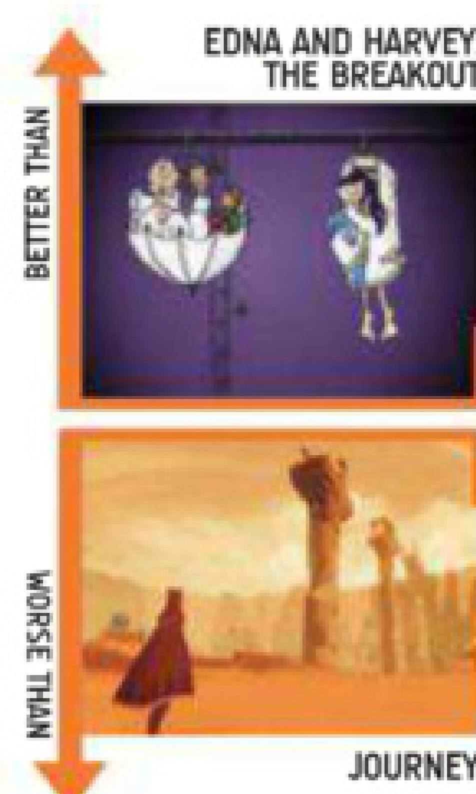
Deponia is utter rubbish – the planet of Deponia, that is. Its landscape is littered with garbage and a restless young man named Rufus can't wait to be rid of it. As a game, however, *Deponia* is worth fishing out of the bin. The first instalment of a planned trilogy, this is a decent adventure that stands out in spite of its trashy veneer.

Underneath all the garbage, *Deponia* tells the rather archetypical story of an ordinary guy itching to leave home and see the world. Rufus has his eye on Elysium, the utopia floating above his junkyard planet. When an escape attempt backfires and an Elysian princess, aptly named Goal, crash lands in a trash heap, he sets out to fix her malfunctioning brain implant so they can leave Deponia together. (And, if he's lucky, he'll make her his girlfriend in the process.)

Deponia is a point-and-click game with an old-school mentality; if you've played the LucasArts games of the Nineties you'll recognise the inspiration. The story may not hold up to the genre's finest but it's generally well written, even if certain jokes seem not to carry over from the original German. The voice work is competent, too, although at many points the acting and context don't quite meet up.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Lace Mamba Global
DEVELOPER: Daeadlic Entertainment
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Vista or Windows, 2.5 GHz (Single Core) or 2 GHz (Dual Core), 2 Gb RAM, 5Gb HDD, OpenGL 2.0 compatible video with 512Mb RAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A







The puzzles, a mix of inventory experiments and logic minigames, have a wackiness that usually makes some sense in this oddball world. (How to wake up a girl in a coma? Extra-strong espresso, of course!) In general, puzzle solutions are creative but fair, though a lack of obvious clues sometimes leads to frustration. For those without old-school patience, a handy hotspot finder negates pixel hunting, while most minigames can be skipped.

For a game set on a landfill, *Deponia* has a pleasing aesthetic: steampunk meets Saturday morning cartoon, with *Simpsons*-esque character designs and suitably cluttered backgrounds. Deponia's citizens contribute personality, with a bubble-wrap-obsessed robot, a suspiciously burly 'woman' working a reception desk, and Rufus's chain-smoking ex-girlfriend among the standouts. Sadly, many a conversation unfolds with participants standing idle, depriving the otherwise vibrant Deponia of much-needed motion. It's a shame since the animations that do appear, usually the slapstick outcomes of Rufus's failed efforts, are elaborate and amusing.

Deponia is a good length, running around eleven hours, but it suffers from uneven pacing, with more than half the game spent wandering the claustrophobic Kuvaq – the town Rufus desperately wants to leave. The slow start could be forgiven if not for a series of other annoyances that keep *Deponia* from rising to the top of the trash heap, including a repetitive soundtrack and a smattering of especially difficult puzzles. Plus the ending is a real downer, setting up a sequel but finishing this instalment on an unsatisfying note. These flaws do tarnish the experience a bit, but the quirky *Deponia* is still worth a play, litter and all.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GET MOVING: Animation is largely absent from *Deponia*, even when dialogue suggests that people should be on the move. We'd love to see more action, especially to spice up long conversations.

VERDICT 7/10
FAR MORE TREASURE THAN TRASH

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR?

Saturday Morning RPG

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Joystick Labs
DEVELOPER: Mighty Rabbit Studios
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN THE RELIC



WORSE THAN CHAOS RINGS II

If you're not 30-ish then *Saturday Morning RPG* likely won't make any sense. It's a tribute to the American action-adventure cartoons of the Eighties, as well as a bunch of other kids' stuff, and makes no attempt to accommodate anyone who *wasn't* a child of that era.

Saturday Morning RPG's biggest strength is how utterly Eighties it feels. The music, in particular, is bang-on – not surprising, considering it was all composed by Vince DiCola, the who wrote the scores for both *Rocky IV* and *Transformers: The Movie*. It's anthemic, overblown, orchestral rock, and we could listen to it all day.

The visual presentation is great too. Mighty Rabbit has found a cosy middle-ground between Eighties animation and game graphics. It mostly looks like a standard 16-bit RPG, but in cut-scenes the environments and camera angles go 3D, while the characters remain flat. It's distinctive and it works.

It even manages not to be annoyingly unfunny. While most self-consciously retro games lay on the weak gags way too thick, *Saturday Morning RPG* keeps its humour reined in. It's not laugh-out-loud funny, but it does induce more smiles than cringes.

As a *game* though, *Saturday Morning RPG* feels a bit flimsy. There are some nice ideas in terms of combat, perks and character customisation, but it's never particularly engaging. It's entertaining but there's little in the way of a sense of accomplishment.

Saturday Morning RPG is being produced as an episodic series, with the first episode free and subsequent parts at £1.49. It might be that subsequent episodes will be built on more substantial ideas and that the series will improve with time, but at the moment *Saturday Morning RPG* leaves a charming, but somewhat hollow impression.

VERDICT 6/10
CHARMING BUT SHALLOW



Above: This is the attack triggered by using an item that looks a lot like an Optimus Prime toy.

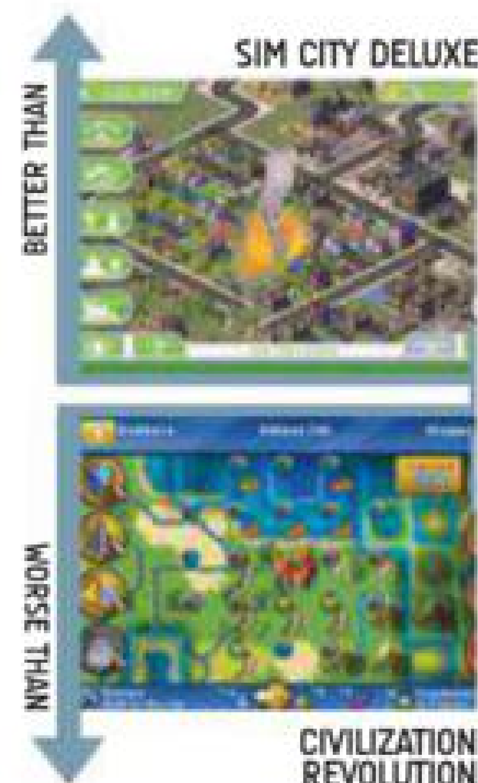
JUST ONE MORE YEAR...

Epic Astro Story

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPhone
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Kairosoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.49
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN SIM CITY DELUXE



WORSE THAN CIVILIZATION REVOLUTION

Epic really is the word. Despite the iPhone's relatively small screen, Kairosoft's latest sim excels by constantly expanding its own horizons. The difference between this sci-fi city-building game and most others is that it doesn't simply start with a vast empty map for you to populate, but rather begins small and expands outwards as you explore further into the distance. Forming 'away teams', you send a group of your finest residents off into uncharted territory to fight off any monsters hiding there but, more importantly, to gather more resources and discover new technologies vital to furthering your civilisation.

Like most other Kairosoft games, the thrill of *Epic Astro Story* comes from its addictive gameplay cycle – investing in the game world in some small way until you have enough income to make bigger investments, and so on, until you're running your own empire. Yet unlike *Game Dev Story*, which increased in scale purely through the review scores and sales of your videogame creations, *Epic Astro Story* grows visually – your own space city stretching out exactly as you planned it. And with that horizontal scale comes greater freedom of expression, not just in the placement and purpose of buildings but in the number of tasks you can choose to take on at once. As such, this may well be the most involving game Kairosoft has made.



Above: The further you expand into the horizons of *Epic Astro Story*, the more different terrains – and their own natural resources – you discover. There is no final frontier...

It's also a very familiar experience. Kairosoft's unmistakable 8-bit art works wonders in the city-building genre; the streets teeming with pixel people so busied that the game almost becomes a digital ant farm, mesmerising to watch through the iPhone's glass screen. The developer's playful sense of humour shines through too. Residents with names like James Turk and Wes Smasher boldly go on missions, only to later communicate back to the captain purely because they're bored, making this at least the funniest *Star Trek* game never made, if not the best.

Whether this is Kairosoft's best game is open to debate. *Game Dev Story* just about inches past on the strength of its subject matter, but this is following close behind on its epic scale alone.

VERDICT 8/10
ALMOST PIXEL PERFECT

IF ONLY FRUIT WAS THIS ADDICTIVE

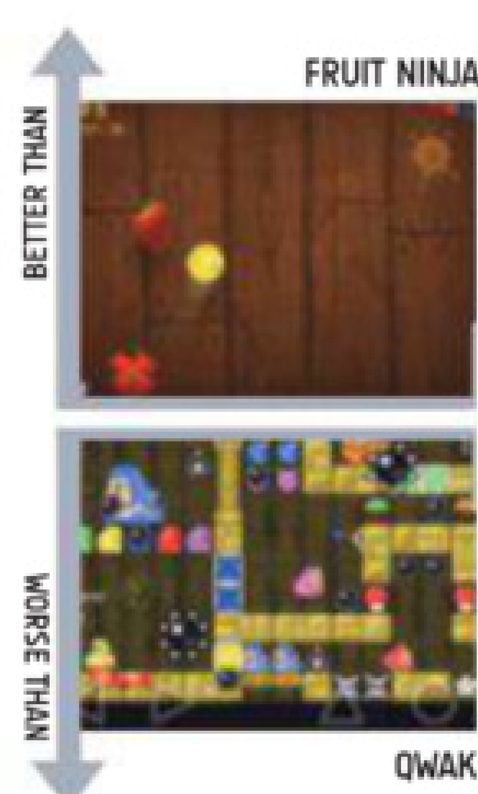
8bit Ninja

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: Hungary
PUBLISHER: Dogbyte Games
DEVELOPER: Gabor Arpad Korda
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

FRUIT NINJA



WORSE THAN

QWAK

Do games always need to have a goal? Not necessarily. Sometimes they just need to be fun and hold your attention. *8bit Ninja* does have a goal of sorts, but it's one of the slightest you'll find. Quite simply, you just have to survive as long as possible without being crushed by the giant fruits falling from above.

With simple left-and-right controls, the gameplay couldn't be much simpler, but the longer you survive in *8bit Ninja* the more chaotic the challenge becomes and, with that, the more addictive the experience gets. The closer you come to breaking your own personal record, the more intense the game feels, to the point where it becomes a matter of personal pride more than it does competing with friends.

8bit Ninja is more than just a score attack game, though. There's a persistent nature to the experience that sees your ninja level-up with each play, and collect coins and eggs that can be exchanged for new characters, powers and levels. This progression ups the addictiveness considerably, keeping you coming back for more, while also introducing a nice risk/reward mechanic as you run right into the path of destructive fruits for yet another coin.

All of this makes for a cycle of play that feels rewarding despite a lack of overall goals. It's less a game and more a time waster, but with the well-honed design of a classic arcade game, that's not something anyone could hold against it.

Above: *8bit Ninja* is funded by microtransactions, but they're not essential to progress – they just unlock content quicker.



VERDICT 7/10
A FRUITFUL DIVERSION

ANOTHER APP THAT'S A STEAL

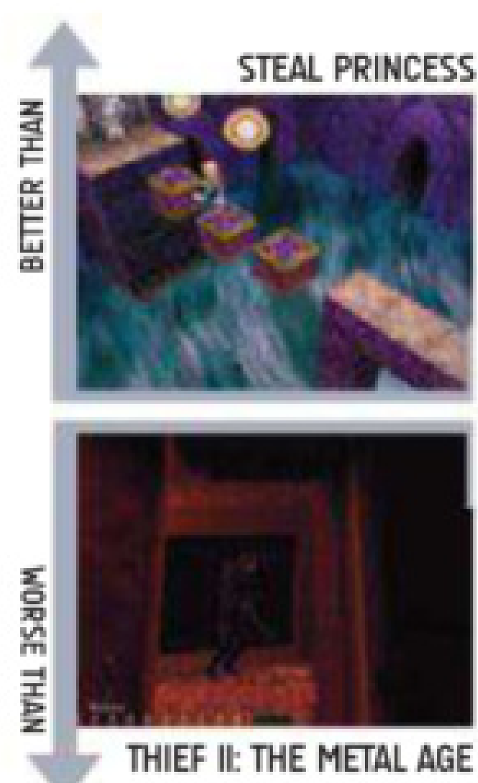
Robbery Bob

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Chillingo
DEVELOPER: Level Eight
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

STEAL PRINCESS



WORSE THAN

THIEF II: THE METAL AGE

Stealth games are one of the hardest genres to get right, largely because it's easy to make them so unforgiving that they become frustrating exercises in repetitive and unrewarding trial and error. *Robbery Bob*, thankfully, does not fall into those traps.

Featuring small, self-contained levels, *Robbery Bob* sets you a simple goal – enter a building, steal at least one key item and then get out of there safely. You'll get bonus points for stealing more things, in a short amount of time, and without being spotted. But, thankfully, these are all optional bonuses, which keeps the difficulty curve as steep or flat as you like.

However, being spotted isn't the end of the world. Clever players will run out of sight and find somewhere to hide, and the intuitive touch controls mean it's both easy and fun to do that – there's none of the frustration of having to hold a million different buttons while wrestling with a 3D camera, as in other games.

Robbery Bob's simplicity is its masterstroke, enabling anyone to pick up the game and enjoy it, but that doesn't mean there's nothing to do. Every stage introduces a new type of game mechanic – such as dogs that bark if you get too close, or noisy machines you can set off on purpose to distract security guards – all of which up the challenge while, importantly, giving smart players lots of resources to draw upon. All of the best videogames give players the tools to tackle a challenge in multiple ways, and *Robbery Bob* does this particularly well.

Far from frustrating – a great deal of fun, in fact – *Robbery Bob* is proof positive that stealth games need not be a chore, and is one of the finest original games to appear on iOS in some time.



Above: If there's one small quibble we have with *Robbery Bob*, it's that cameras can see through doors when swung open. Please fix, Chillingo.



VERDICT 8/10
A THIEF OF TIME

A FEW UPS AND DOWNS, BUT ALWAYS GREAT

VVVVVV

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Nicalis
DEVELOPER: Terry Cavanagh
PRICE: £7.20
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



The confusingly titled *VVVVVV* can apparently be pronounced two ways – either the letter V six times or 'Vees' – but it really only means one thing. It's a visual representation of the way the game plays, main character Captain Viridian able to jump from floor to ceiling at the push of a button.

The entirety of Terry Cavanagh's *Metroid*-esque platform game is designed around this central concept, with virtually every room taking the form of a devious obstacle course laden with traps. Without the ability to jump, players have to zig-zag through each area with pin-point accuracy, often to such mind-bogglingly dexterous levels that repeatedly dying and retrying becomes an obsession. Like *Super Meat Boy* or *Dark Souls*, it'll somehow get you grinning from ear to ear and screaming into your 3DS screen all at the same time.

VVVVVV earns its place among the finest 3DS downloads on basic gameplay alone, but rises closer to the top as it wraps new challenges around its central mechanic. Find and rescue a couple of Viridian's missing crew and the game starts to throw some truly evil new tricks at you – like the one crew member who will follow Viridian when he's on the floor but not when he's on the ceiling, effectively subverting relatively simple rooms into nerve-wracking upside-down gauntlets. With every passing room, *VVVVVV* feels another step closer to impossible, but such is the quality of its level design, the consistency of its rule set and reliability of its controls that victory always feels just one or two deaths away. Like any great feat of difficulty you learn from each of those deaths, and 969 of them later we felt like zig-zagging ninjas, having reached *VVVVVV*'s finale still craving more.

Thankfully, there is more. This 3DS port of the 2010 PC game comes with eighteen extra levels, created by other indie developers including *Minecraft* creator Notch and *VVVVVV*'s composer, combining with an attractive but unobtrusive 3D effect to make this the definitive version of a bonafide modern indie classic.

Below: *VVVVVV*'s C64-esque visuals and music are extremely nostalgic, while the *Jet Set Willy*-style screen names regularly elicit a chuckle. This is rose-tinted retro-pandering done right.





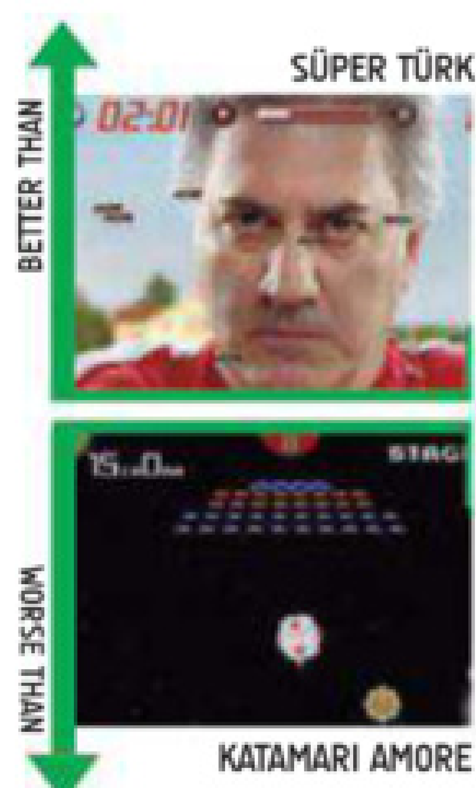
VERDICT 9/10
VVVVVERY GOOD

NOT ON A ROLL

Kotomon

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Monstars
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.49
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Created by some of the people responsible for such genre classics as *Lumines* and *Child Of Eden*, *Kotomon* is a game that immediately captures your interest, especially as it promises the same sort of musicality to its gameplay as the aforementioned Q Entertainment games. Sadly, however, any faith previously earned by *Kotomon*'s developers is completely misplaced. This game is a mess.

On paper, the idea of *Kotomon* is at least sound. You roam a landscape, rolling eggs until the hatch into funny little creatures, which you then guide around the stage to the goal, picking said creatures up and throwing them into any enemy that gets in your way. Roll a creature into multiple enemies at once and they'll pop out of existence in sequence, the sound effects chaining together to signify the resulting score multiplier.

It's all well and good in theory, but turns out to be horrible in practice. Just controlling your character is a nightmare. The virtual analogue stick is woefully unresponsive, causing you to walk around in circles or even in the wrong direction completely, while the targeting system is just as bad. The majority of the time, tapping on the screen sees your little creature roll off towards anywhere but the enemy you were aiming at.


Above: Every move in *Kotomon* is supposed to add a different beat to the soundtrack. But like the rest of the game, it works badly in practice.

These technical issues are compounded further by *Kotomon*'s ridiculous failure mechanics. With no health bar, death is instantaneous. So expect to flip out in a rage every time you're killed, as you vainly try to make sense of the unwieldy controls and walk right into an enemy through no fault of your own. Likewise, you'll be faced with a game over should all of your creatures die. But when they're guided by such shonky AI, it seems totally unfair to punish the player when they wander off-screen and get killed by who knows what.

At the time of writing, developer Monstars has promised improvements in an upcoming patch, but even if these substantial flaws are addressed *Kotomon* will remain an uninteresting game. When they do work, the core mechanics aren't that fun and the use of sound lacks the excitement of something like *Rez*. Ultimately, all of *Kotomon*'s apparent promises are well and truly broken.

VERDICT 2/10
A REAL MONSTER



“The graphics were totally unique and the technology allowed for almost unlimited creatures on-screen with no slow down”

BRIAN FARGO, INXILE ENTERTAINMENT



WHY I ♥...

Sacrifice

BRIAN FARGO
CEO, INXILE ENTERTAINMENT

"My favorite game of all time is Sacrifice from Shiny/Interplay. I did not pick the game because we published it but because I spent the most hours, had the most fun and became a hermit while I played it. The graphics were totally unique and the technology allowed for almost unlimited creatures on-screen with no slow down. The tactics and subtlety were bar none, and despite spending hundreds – if not thousands – of hours I never grew bored and I always learned something new. It also featured the voice of the late great Tony Jay, and he was one of my favourite voice talents of all time."

RETRO

>. 'READY TO ROLL OUT!!'

NO.124 JULY 2012

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BEHIND THE SCENES

READY 2 RUMBLE BOXING

For over 15 years, Punch-Out!! was known as the best boxing game in the business, but all that changed when Midway entered the ring in 1999



Released: 1999
Format: Dreamcast
Publisher: Midway
Developer: In-house

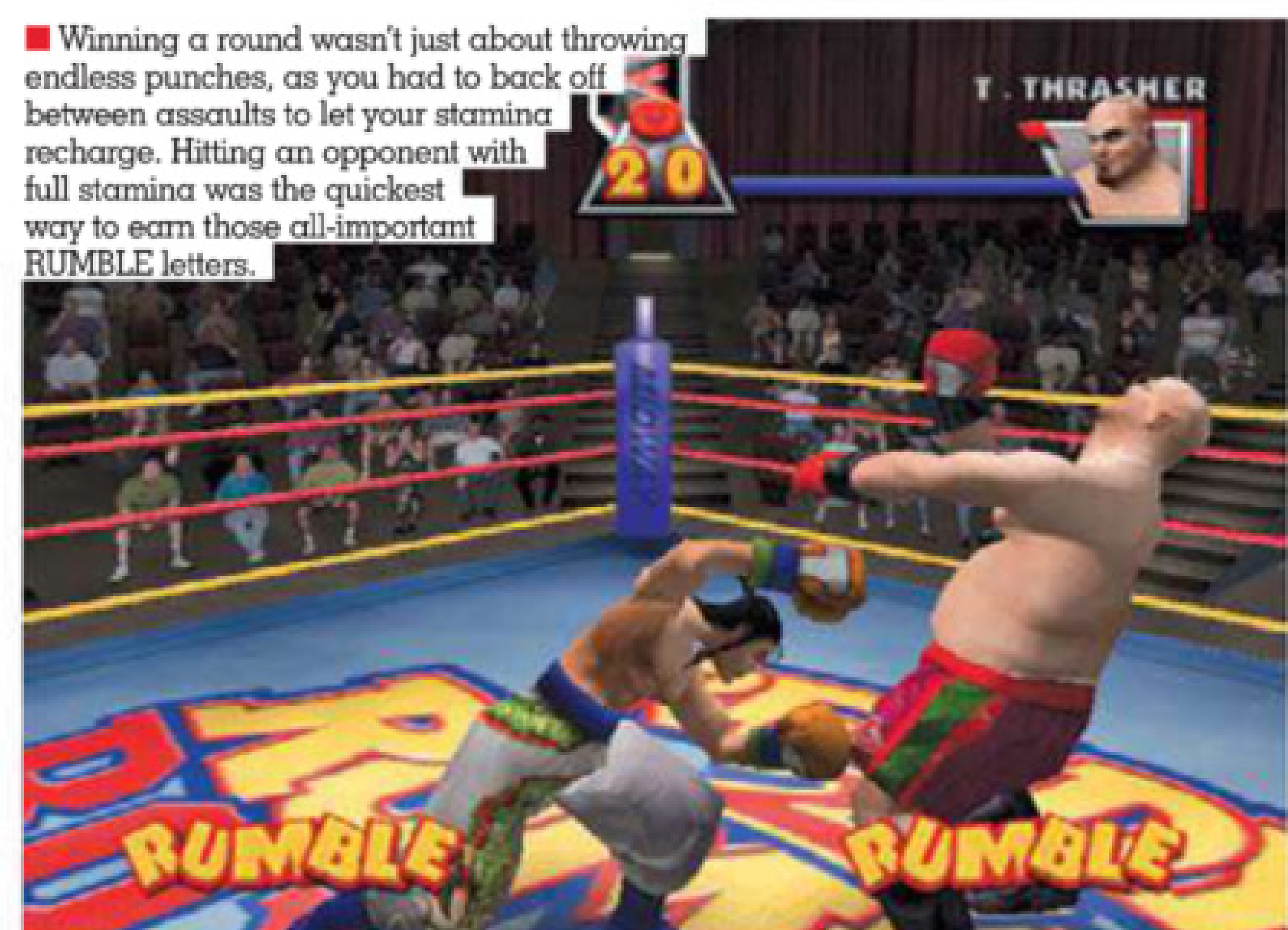
KEY STAFF:
Emmanuel Valdez: Lead Artist
Dave A. Wagner: Lead Programmer
Alesia Howard: Senior Artist
Terry Bertram: Senior Programmer



AFTER THE SEGA Saturn and PlayStation launched with *Virtua Fighter* and *Battle Arena Toshinden* respectively, it became something of an unwritten rule that a console must launch with at least one fighting game. After all, what better genre is there to showcase a new generation of graphics? For the Dreamcast, this turned out to be one of the most impressive launch line-ups in gaming history with *Virtua Fighter 3tb*, *Marvel Vs. Capcom*, *Power Stone* and, of course, *SoulCalibur*. But while these games all originated in Japan, a talented team at Midway did the West justice with *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing*.

"The first game I ever worked on was *ESPN Baseball Tonight* for the Genesis and SNES," says *Ready 2 Rumble*'s Lead Artist, Emmanuel Valdez, describing how he first got involved with the industry. "I was creating 2D art content, which in the old days they called 'pixel pushing'. The funny thing was, I was already trained to create 3D art content such as characters, environments and props, but the world of videogame development was still using 2D graphics. It was a bit of a step down in skill set, but I fondly remember the challenges of making art with 16 colours and limited pixels."

After leaving Park Place Productions, Valdez worked as a Senior Artist on one of history's less reputable fighting games. "I came to work at Midway after helping establish Sony Computer Entertainment of America's San Diego office," Valdez reminisces. "*Bio F.R.E.A.K.S.* was originally an arcade game, built and designed to run on 3Dfx Voodoo graphics cards. We spent three years developing the game, which started out as a giant robot fighting game and later evolved into a complex fighting game with flying and shooting features. It never made it into arcades and CONTINUED >.

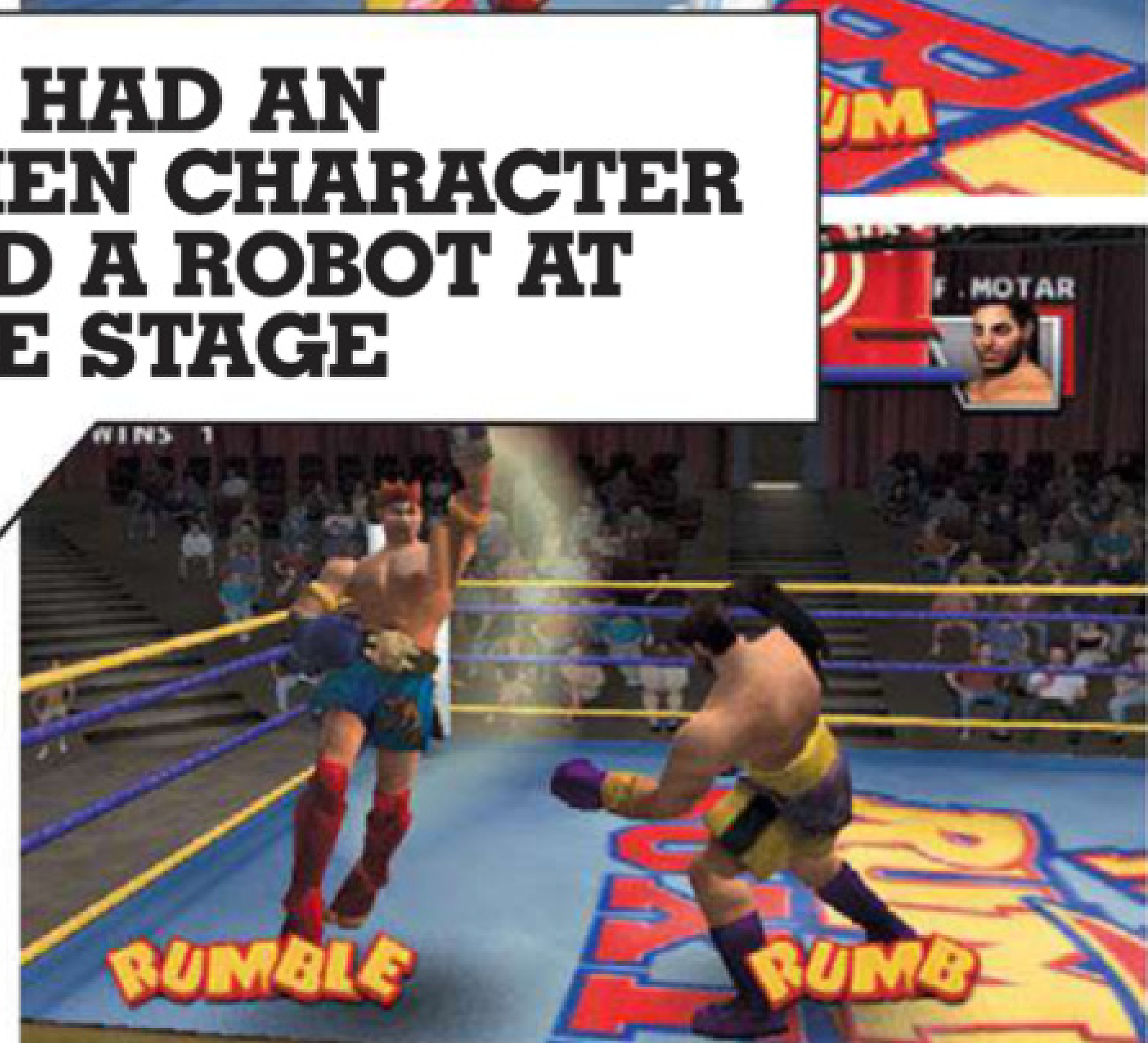


Winning a round wasn't just about throwing endless punches, as you had to back off between assaults to let your stamina recharge. Hitting an opponent with full stamina was the quickest way to earn those all-important RUMBLE letters.



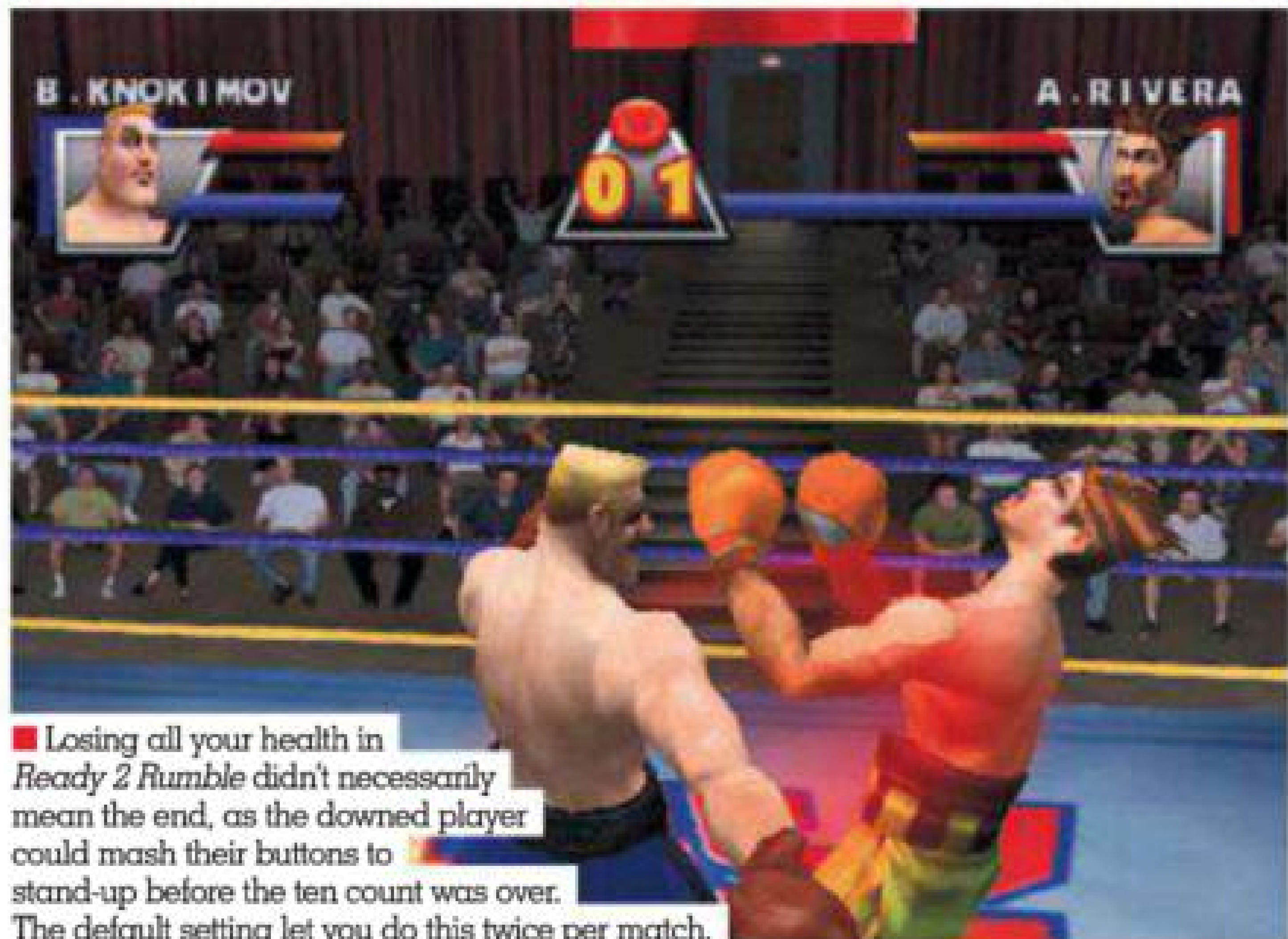


WE HAD AN ALIEN CHARACTER AND A ROBOT AT ONE STAGE





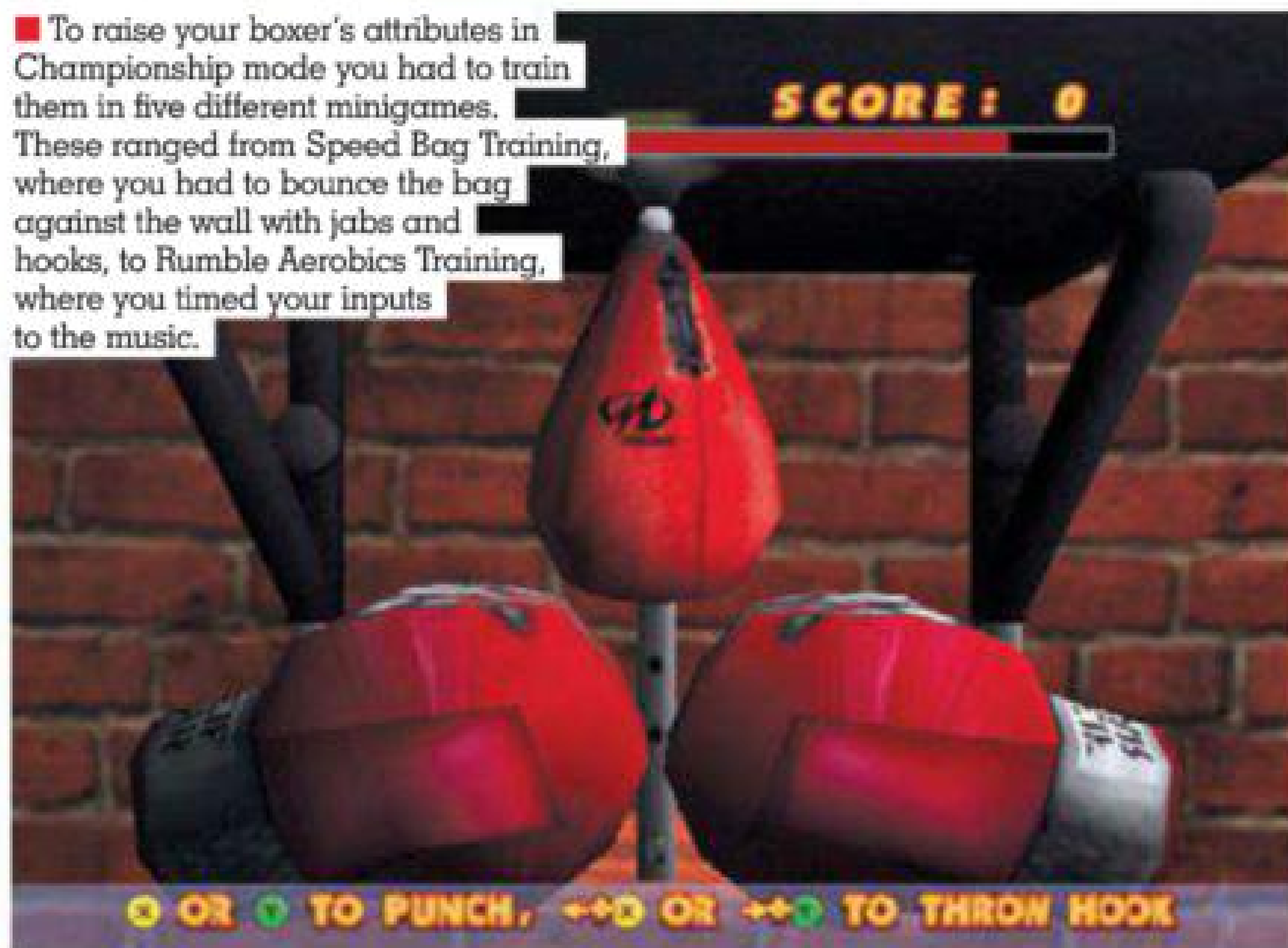




Losing all your health in *Ready 2 Rumble* didn't necessarily mean the end, as the downed player could mash their buttons to stand-up before the ten count was over. The default setting let you do this twice per match.

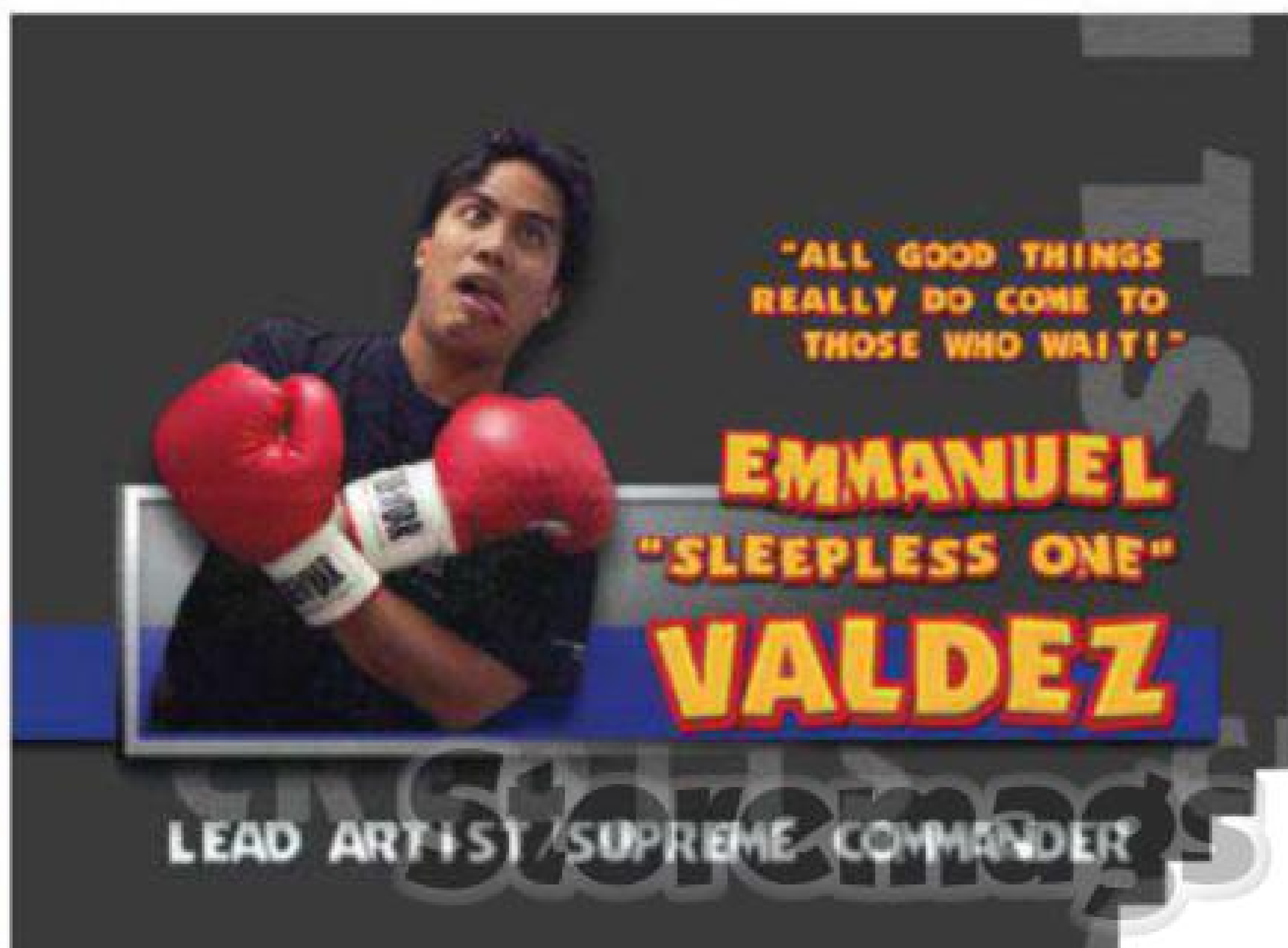






To raise your boxer's attributes in Championship mode you had to train them in five different minigames. These ranged from Speed Bag Training, where you had to bounce the bag against the wall with jabs and hooks, to Rumble Aerobics Training, where you timed your inputs to the music.





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
SLAPPY MCGUIRE

I've liked it in the wrong order. I hated it when it came out, but played it out of curiosity more recently and enjoyed it. Makes me wonder what other decent Dreamcast games I was turned off of – all because of that crappy controller...

Posted by:
MERMAN

I must admit, I've played it a fair bit but it never really knocked me out. The cartoon visuals are great, but the fluctuating difficulty level means single-player is a chore. Against a well-matched human player it comes into its own, though.

Posted by:
CAPNAHOLE1980

Played this a lot at uni – it made a great post-pub multiplayer laugh. Thought the controls were spot on.

Posted by:
CAOMHANACH

I remember playing this on a demo Dreamcast in a high street store. I was blown away by the graphics in relation to the other systems available at the time. I remember thinking to myself 'I've got to get a Dreamcast' after about ten minutes playing *Ready 2 Rumble*. I instead waited for the PS2 to eventually arrive and bought the *Ready 2 Rumble* port for Sony's box of tricks!

Posted by:
TJEFFS1986

It was my introduction to 'next-gen' graphics. It knocked me out! I would go into the shop over and over to play the demo. It was playing the port on the PSone that I realised, 'These visuals are not going to cut it anymore'. That Christmas I got a Dreamcast. Oh, I almost forgot… RRRRRRRRRUUUMMBBLEEEEE!

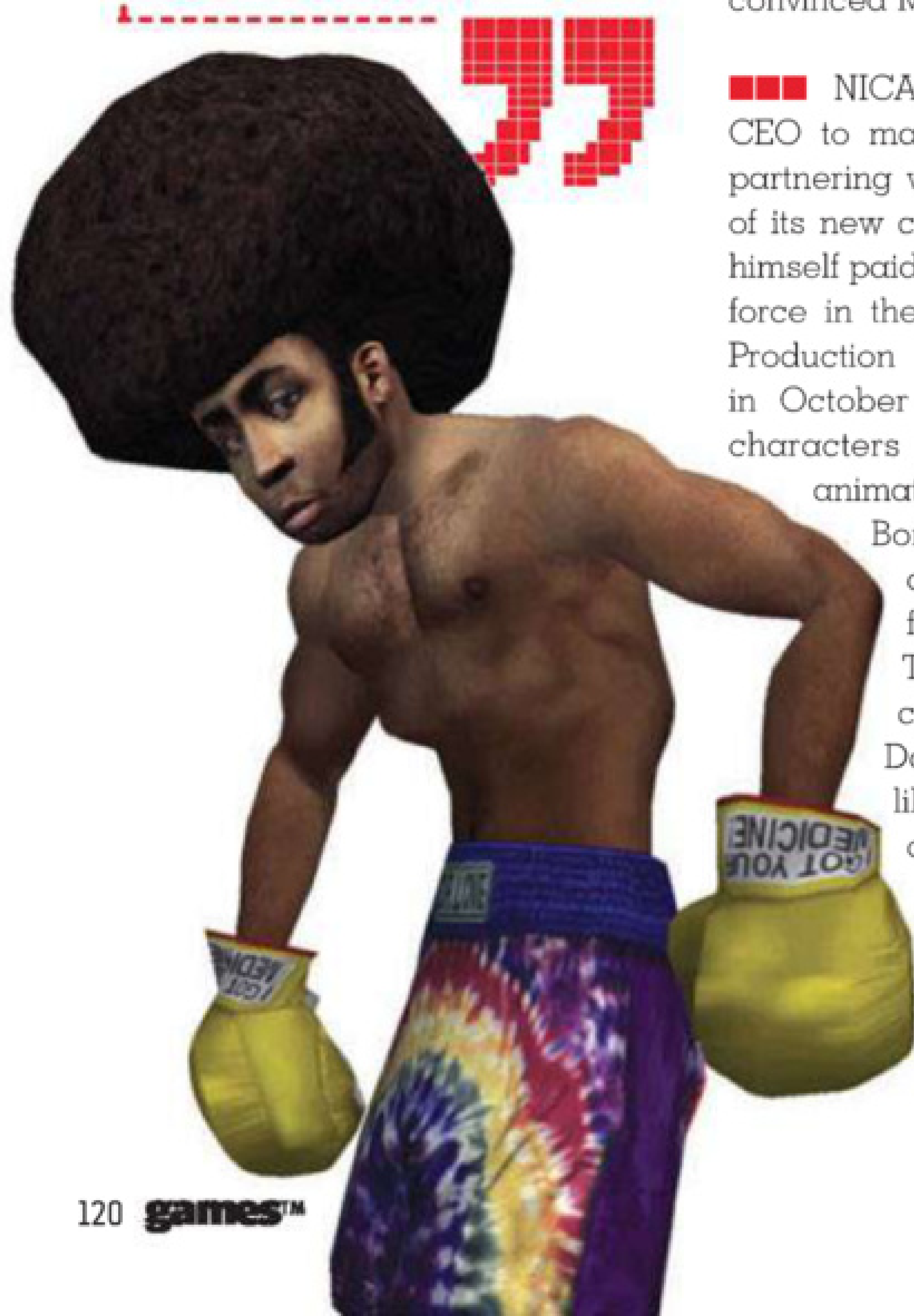


WHAT THEY SAID...



"Midway has put together a true champ of a boxing game, which deserves to do well. Make no mistake, *Ready 2 Rumble* is no punch-drunk hitter, but a right swinger"

Dreamcast Magazine Issue 1



was salvaged into ports for the PlayStation and N64."

Having amassed a wealth of experience with *Bio F.R.E.A.K.S.*' prolonged development, the team began discussing its next project. "We compiled a list ranging from a dodgeball game to a platformer," Valdez explains. "One of our artists, Mike Cuevas, threw in the idea of doing a boxing game. No kicking. No throwing. No flying. No shooting. We were able to break down the mechanics to just punching and movement. For inspiration we watched an animated boxing movie with hyper-realistic characters and saw an opportunity to introduce a comical, stylised look. It became the drive for designing a simpler game focused on a few features and mechanics."

This led to the team working on a boxing arcade game called *The Contender*. "Midway gave us a couple of months to prototype the game in August 1998," Valdez recalls. "The first iterations were based on the technology of *Bio F.R.E.A.K.S.* and ran on arcade hardware. We then shifted our focus to home consoles and were given early Dreamcast dev-kits to develop the prototype. Our first generic boxer showcased some advanced graphics like facial damage and jiggling muscles, and we eventually got two boxers on the screen with all the basic locomotion in place. We even created a special move – a powerful uppercut."

It was a sure-fire recipe for a knockout game, but as the deadline neared, *The Contender* was suddenly put into question. "We heard rumblings that Midway Chicago wanted to make their own boxing game," says Valdez, "and that our CEO, Neil Nicastro, was going to fly to San Diego to see the game and either give us approval to move into production or cancel the project. Neil actually flew out to cancel the game, but when he saw our prototype, he couldn't help but be excited and was convinced Midway had to make it."

NICASTRO WASN'T THE only CEO to make the trip, as with Sega partnering with Midway for the launch of its new console, Shoichiro Iriamajiri himself paid a visit and was the guiding force in the switch to the Dreamcast. Production of the game then began in October 1998, with the prototype characters giving way to 17 highly animated pugilists that included Boris 'The Bear' Knokimov and Butcher Brown as the first two original creations. These were followed by Muay Thai champion Rocket Samachay and Nat Daddy, with Nat looking suspiciously like a caricature of former heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis.

"The characters were all archetypes of pugilists, stereotypes for humour and exaggerations of some of our fellow co-workers and friends," Valdez confirms. "Our main character, Afro Thunder, was based on the audio designer and composer of the game, Orpheus Hanley. Big 'Willy' Johnson was a throwback to the fisticuffs style of boxing, while Salua Tua was a blown-up version of our QA Manager. Rocket Samchay was our senior artist, Mike Cuevas, and 'Furious' Faz Motar was a combination of my two closest friends from college. We had loads of fun creating these characters, and we ridiculed all cultures and nationalities equally for extreme laughs."

> **SELENE STRIKE WAS MODELLED AFTER MY WIFE, BUT IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE HER**



EMMANUEL VALDEZ
Design and graphics

But when it came to crafting *Ready 2 Rumble*'s two female fighters – Selene Strike and Lulu Valentine – Valdez looked for inspiration closer to home. "Selene Strike was modelled after my wife, but she swears it doesn't look anything like her," Valdez chuckles. "We included two attractive and buxom babes because we wanted to make a game that appealed to our target demographic of young males, and we wanted to showcase our jiggle technology and empower them with viscous boxing moves to provide hours of fun gameplay. Plus, all fighting games have female characters and *Ready 2 Rumble* is really just a simple fighting game."

We then asked Valdez to name his favourite character. "I'd be severally punished not to say Selene Strike," Valdez muses, "but I'd have to say Salua Tua. From his stretchmarks to his jiggling man-boobs, he was funny-looking and had lots of character. He was a great boxer to fight with and had good reach and solid power. He also inspired the 'screenshake' tech that made the ropes bounce





The Tears For Fears reunion gig was a bitter disappointment.

up and down as he moved around the ring. It was an excellent touch of detail that made the game feel more realistic when compared to other boxing games at the time."

That said, other boxing games like *EA Sports Knockout Kings* didn't have Damien Black. "I couldn't help but include homage to classic fighting games with a boss character that was otherworldly," Valdez remembers. "It demonstrated that we didn't take ourselves too seriously. I mean, who would put a 500-year-old demon from another dimension in a boxing game? Nat Daddy was our first planned boss but later we made him more of a sub-boss. If you look carefully, they have the same fighting style and similar stances. Change up the textures and add horns and Nat Daddy becomes Damien Black."

Encountering Mr. Black at the end of Arcade mode while playing on the hardest setting was a shock for most players, especially when trying to overcome his viscous Blackheart Spear body blow, but according to Valdez, the quirks could've been a lot more outlandish. "We had an alien character and a robot at one stage," Valdez says. "They were a little too extreme in the weirdness category, detracted from the spirit of boxing and seemed more appropriate for a traditional fighting game. We were efficient in designing characters, but didn't go too far with ideas and concepts we knew weren't going to work."

ONE THING THAT clearly did work, however, was the cartoonish violence. "We knew early on that we wanted facial damage, bruising and swelling, because as horrible as those things are in real boxing, they're some of the reasons why we watch it," Valdez reasons. "Exaggerate them and they become funny. The tech was especially challenging since we had no experience in creating it. We also had to develop tools for the artists to iterate and test the effect. But the result was a secondary read on the characters that gave them even more personality and humour. It was deliberate and in your face."

It's a sentiment that's also true of the combat system, as even by today's standards the game feels tight and responsive. CONTINUED >.

Taking the Michael

SECURING THE vocal talents of Michael Buffer was one thing, but when the team began work on *Ready 2 Rumble*'s sequel, they were contacted by the most famous Michael of them all. "A month after the game released we received a call from someone at Michael Jackson's camp saying he was interested in appearing in the sequel," Valdez reminisces. "At first we thought it was a prank, but we soon got a call from his lawyer who invited us to meet with him personally. It was a life-changing experience meeting MJ and hanging out at the Neverland Ranch. Working with Michael was awesome and we became very good friends. The whole team even got to spend a day at Neverland after we launched *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing: Round 2*."

The late Michael Jackson wasn't the only celebrity to feature in the game either, as following an endorsement in one of the worst fighting games ever made, a certain Shaq Fu master was overdue some redemption. "Shaquille O'Neal was already contracted to appear in multiple Midway games after signing to appear in *NBA Showtime*," Valdez explained. "Since we had Michael we thought we should include more guest celebrities. We also had political parodies of Bill and Hilary Clinton in the game. What a bizarre roster of characters!" He's not kidding.



When asked for a quote, Jackson said,"Your blood is mine. Gonna take you right. Just show your face in broad daylight. I'm telling you on how I feel. Gonna hurt your mind; don't shoot to kill." Then he jumped on tiptoes and grabbed his balls.







■ RUMBLE mode gave your boxer unlimited stamina for a short period of time. It also unlocked their devastating Rumble Flurry attack, which was effectively a multi-hit super move.



"Mike Cuevas and I worked hard to make the game easy to play but hard to master," Valdez explains. "We incorporated boxing fundamentals such as jabs and straights and designed them to be intuitive. We then layered more advanced techniques with button and controller combinations that mimicked natural moves such as hooks and uppercuts. Finally, we added defensive moves that made the game more like a boxing sim. We made sure the controls were responsive with snappy animations that matched the speed of the player's inputs."

Tapping in inputs like backwards-backwards-forwards-punch would also result in special moves like Angel 'Raging' Rivera's Ghetto Blaster and Jet 'Iron' Chin's Great Fang. Some of these moves were generously shown in the manual, while others had to be discovered in classic *Mortal Kombat* fashion – relentless trial and error. "The game wasn't designed to target fighting game fans specifically," Valdez confesses. "We wanted to appeal to a mass market that was otherwise disinterested in boxing or fighting games. But we also wanted to create a degree of mystery and challenge, so we let players experiment with each fighter to discover new moves."

Another key feature was the RUMBLE gauge that, when fully charged, put your boxer into a powered-up state. "The RUMBLE system was designed to reward players with a boost in accordance with other Midway sports games like *NFL Blitz* and *NBA Jam*," Valdez says. "We looked at it as a way to get players to be more aggressive so they could discover more moves and combos, and see the facial damage and swelling. Most of all, it was an easy way to let players execute an über-powerful special move without making them memorise a complex button combination."

It's clear the team wanted *Ready 2 Rumble* to be open and accessible, but to offer an extra layer of depth for those hardcore players that craved complexity, they supplemented the obligatory Arcade mode with an RPG-style Championship mode that let you train your boxer for title fights. "Championship mode was something we planned from the start," Valdez says modestly. "Our programmers had fun creating the minigames as they used different mechanics from the rest of the game. We thought about more traditional modes such as survival and time trial, but kept the game basic and within the realms of boxing as a competitive sport."

And like most other fighting games, keeping the competition on an even footing was half the battle. "Afro Thunder ended up being the most difficult boxer to balance because our CEO, Neil Nicastro, loved that character so much," Valdez remembers. "We had an early build of the game where Afro had an unfair move that Nicastro used to clobber his opponents with. I kept changing it to make it fairer but he'd insist I revert the change for his advantage. For the betterment of the game, it was eventually taken out." If only Capcom had seen the same sense with Gill.

WE WORKED HARD TO MAKE THE GAME EASY TO PLAY BUT HARD TO MASTER

ONE THING THAT makes perfect sense is how the project transitioned from its placeholder title to the catchiest catchphrase in boxing history. "The team had a brainstorming session to come up with a better name than *The Contender*," Valdez remembers. "Dave Wagner, our Lead Programmer, came up with *Ready To Rumble* after hearing Michael Buffer's famous tagline. Our Studio Head and President, John Rowe, loved the title and said we should contact Michael Buffer and ask him to participate in the development process. Since we didn't have licensed boxers, perhaps we could license the most famous ring announcer in all of boxing?"

What happened next was a pivotal moment in the game's development. "I immediately did an internet search and saw he had a website with a phone number," Valdez recalled. "I dialled the number and his brother – the now-famous UFC ring announcer Bruce Buffer – answered the phone. When I mentioned the title, Bruce told me that we had to licence the name since they own it and had routinely sued anyone who used it illegally. A deal

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Punch-Out!! > Ready 2 Rumble Boxing > Fight Night



Nintendo's Famicom classic *Punch-Out!!* proved that boxing games didn't have to be serious to be a adrenaline-filled knockout to play.



It may deal in realism rather than caricature, but *Fight Night* owes a lot to *Ready 2 Rumble*'s sway and dodge control systems.



EXCLUSIVE WRONGS

■ LITTLE MORE than a month after its Dreamcast debut, *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing* appeared on the PlayStation and Nintendo 64. The hot-headed Jimmy Blood was removed from both versions and in his place stood Gino Stiletto for the PSone and J.R. Flurry for the N64. "Like most publishers, Midway wanted to maintain special relationships with each of the three hardware giants of the time; Sega, Sony, and Nintendo," Valdez explains when asked about the console exclusives. "Supplying them with exclusive characters was a common practice, as it provided a reason for some consumers to choose one console system over another. It was a simple idea from a management standpoint, but a loss to the consumers and more work for the developer, as we had to maintain three separate versions of the game." Makes you wonder if Project Soul feels the same way about *SoulCalibur II*…



■ *Ready 2 Rumble* came with some interesting background information in the game manual, including how 'Big' Willy Johnson, the old English gent, was brought to the present day by a mysterious rift in time.

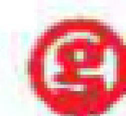
was quickly done and Michael provided his voice and likeness. He was a joy to work with and brought great marketing value and credibility to the game."

After ten months of nonstop development with a team of 12 artists and programmers, *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing* was released alongside the Dreamcast in Europe and the US. "There was no time to sleep," Valdez explained when we asked why he's listed as Emmanuel 'Sleepless One' Valdez in the game's credits. "We were all working 12 to 14 hours a day for almost ten months straight. Crunch time is a way of life for most developers, especially when given tight and near impossible deadlines. Towards the end we discovered Red Bull and I think that created some bouts with insomnia and many sleepless nights."

■■■ BUT BEFORE THE team could finally get some rest, there were still a few sleepless nights to come. "We were celebrating the launch at our Midway office and watching *Good Morning America* with the host, Diane Sawyer, playing the game live on television," Valdez enthuses. "At the beginning, everything looked fine and Diane was having fun with it, but as the game played for another minute, we started to hear the audio overlap in an endless loop. We initially thought the disc was dirty, but after receiving a call from management, telling us the customer service board was being bombarded with complaints, we knew something was amiss."

"Members of the original team, Midway executive technical staff and Sega hardware engineers worked day and night for several days to figure out what could be causing the problems that plagued many of the launch games," Valdez described. "One of our programmers found the problem and soon a fix was implemented. Replacement disks were made available and *Ready 2 Rumble* went on to become the most successful third-party launch game until *SoulCalibur* overtook it the following year. Speaking of which, another interesting fact that nobody knows is that *SoulCalibur* was the inspiration for our game. Yes, a weapons-based fighting game influenced the creation of a comedy boxing game." Take a bow, Namco.

Today, Valdez develops games for iOS systems at Appy Entertainment, a company he co-founded in 2008. Ironically, this means he's back pushing pixels, but with Appy's portfolio now exceeding 16 million downloads, he's still making waves within the industry he clearly loves. "My fondest memory from *Ready 2 Rumble* was working with one of the greatest teams ever," Valdez said with a smile. "We were coming off of a cancelled game, our backs were against the wall and our careers were on the line. But we were able to convince our Studio Head, John Rowe, to let us stay together and make this game. I will always cherish that time working against incredible odds and making what has become a legend in the history of boxing games."




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BEST BOSS

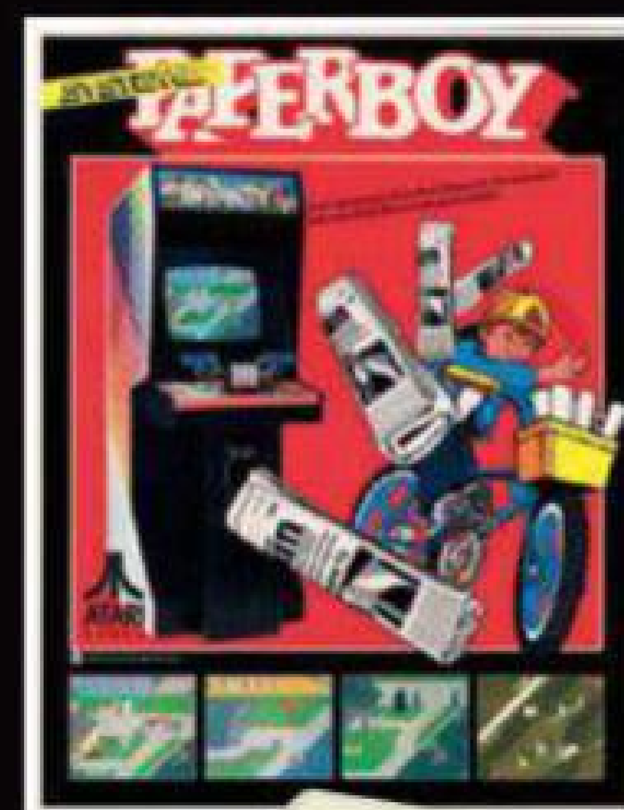
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Arcade [Konami] **1989**

■ The right licensed Konami arcade cabinet had the ability to suck more change out of the pockets of the impressionable youth of the late Eighties and early Nineties than any other. Top of the list was *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the publisher's fast-paced four-player brawler, which featured the cartoon's most notorious adversaries, including the metal-head Shredder and squidgy brain-alien Krang. However, the most memorable appearance belongs to wiseass mammal duo Bebop and Rocksteady. Both can be easily disposed of in their two separate encounters earlier in the game, but it's when the hog and the rhino team-up for vengeance that the Turtles face their greatest challenge. Seemingly impossible without a full quartet of pizza-loving ninjas, players found themselves once again reaching deep into their pockets to beat these spiky-haired punks once and for all.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight.



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: BBC Micro
Year: 1984
Publisher: Elite Systems
Developer: Atari



PAPERBOY

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Atari System 2 **Year:** 1984 **Publisher:** Atari Games **Developer:** In-house

THERE'S CERTAINLY AN irony to be found in the fact that in 1984 legions of kids were spending the money earned from delivering newspapers in the real world on doing the very same thing in a virtual one. But that was the brilliance and draw of *Paperboy*; it took the job of apprentice postman and turned it into a colourful and amusing paper-lobbing gauntlet.

With newspapers limited, stock levels needing replenishing throughout each round, and specific targets to hit (you had to deliver to your customers, but vandalise the homes of non-subscribers), *Paperboy* could almost be described as a tactical shoot-'em-up, something that worked brilliantly in relation to the job it was simulating. But what really makes *Paperboy* a great example of its genre is that it strikes a great balance between offering a good virtual representation of its chosen profession and being both fun and engaging. It's clear that a lot of thought and attention went into its design, a notion supported by an arcade cabinet featuring a control system that mimicked the handlebars on a pushbike, adding to the game's appeal and helping immerse players into the role.

A big hit for Atari, *Paperboy* has appeared on over 20 systems since its release, from the TRS-80 to smartphones.

Many of the 8-bit home computer ports were published by Elite Systems, and one of the most disappointing efforts the publisher put out was the conversion for the BBC Micro, which transformed the colourful suburban streets of the arcade game into to a monochromatic ghost town.

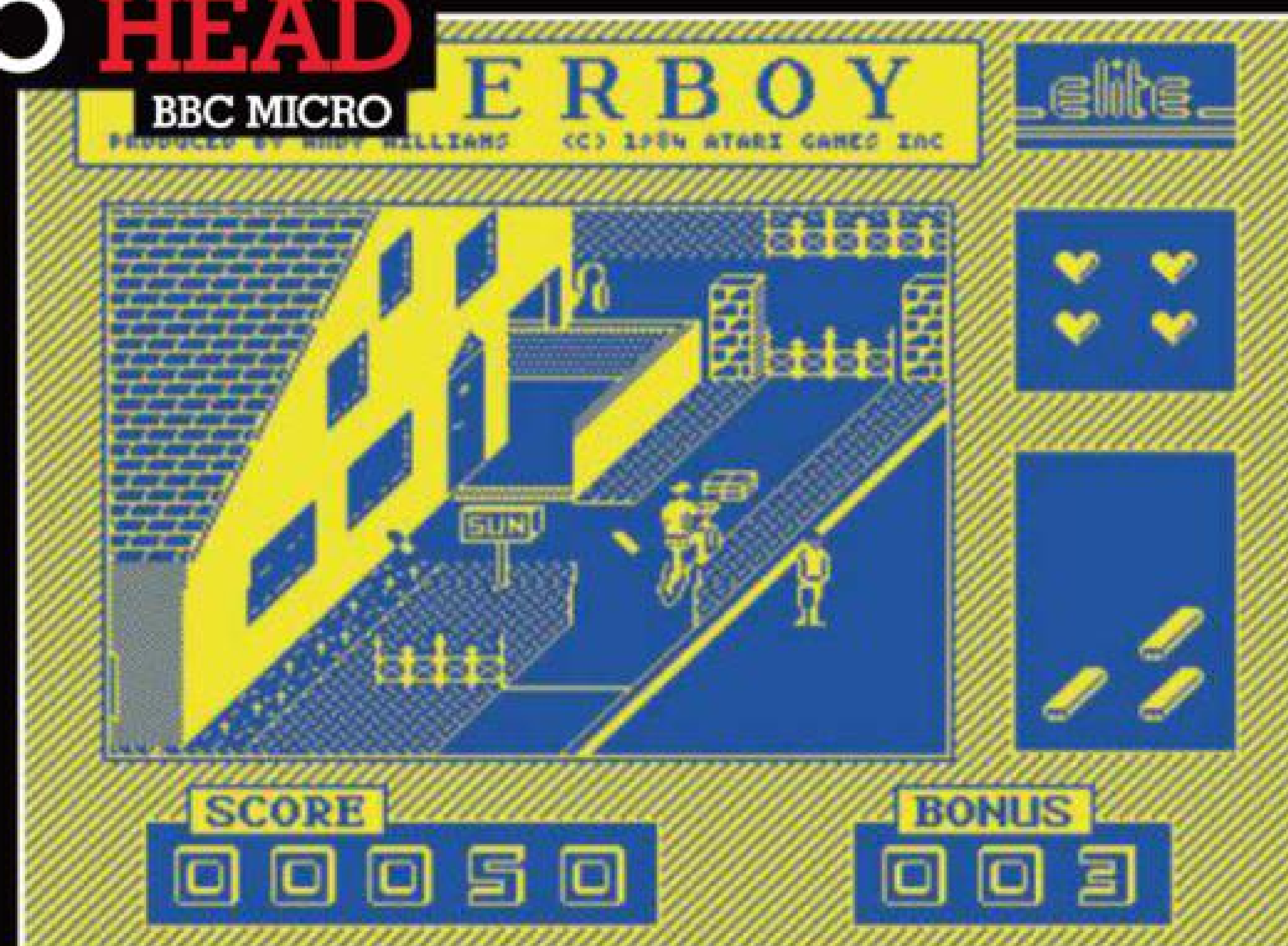
With music only played during the title screen, and not during the game itself, your only audio accompaniment is some random sound effects and the noise of any pins dropping within close proximity. The gameplay also lacks a sense of zeal too: the paperboy pedals like it's his last day at work before he goes off travelling for six months, and in contrast to the arcade game the streets feel sparse and empty as well. But it's the visuals and overall presentation that really let this conversion down, its monochromatic palette sapping all the sunny vibrancy of the original arcade game. And though it must be said that *Paperboy* hardly offered players the most spacious of playing fields to navigate their bikes in, the gameplay of this port feels even more claustrophobic, chiefly because all the action gets stuffed – ironically – into a tiny letterbox.

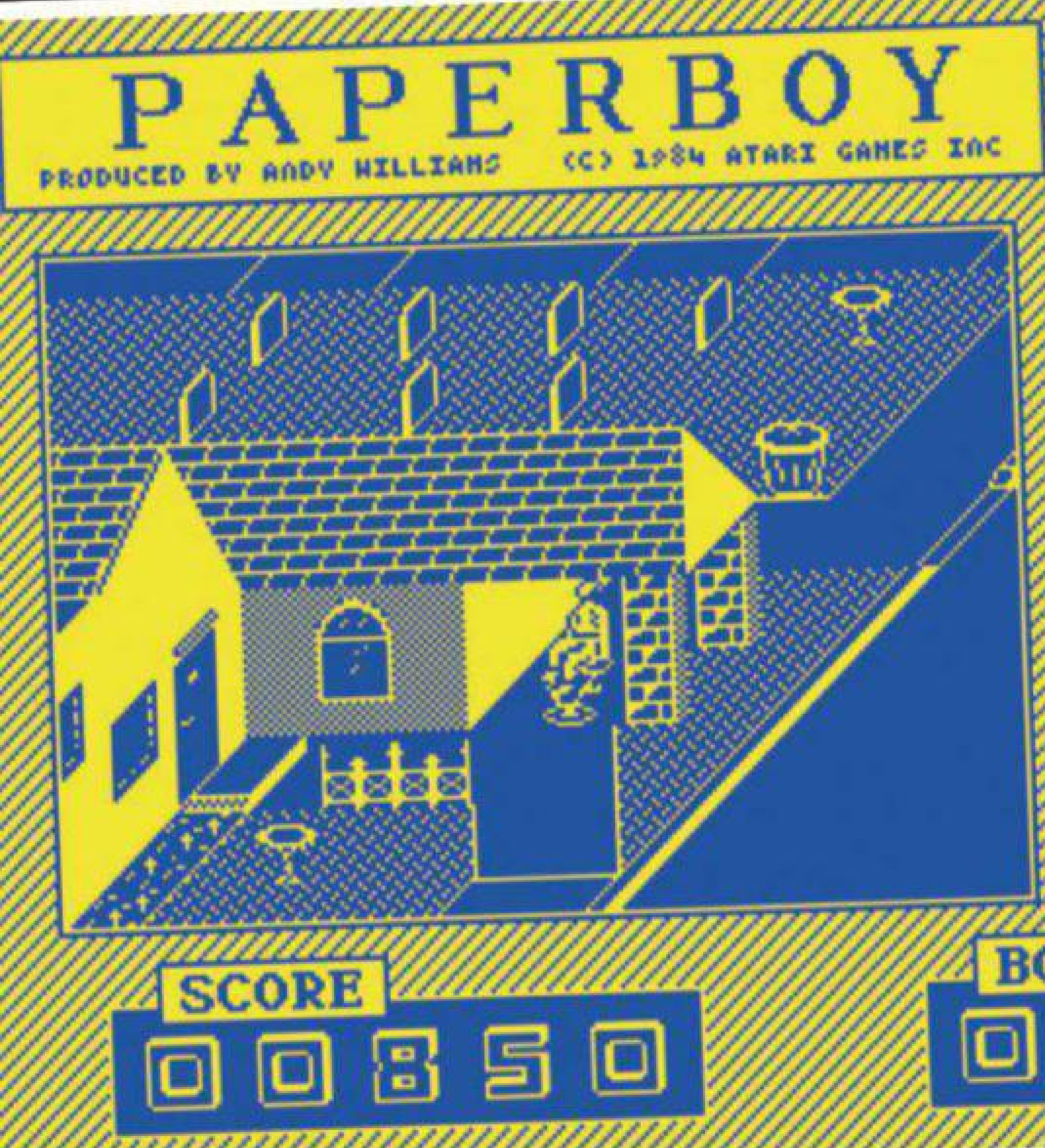
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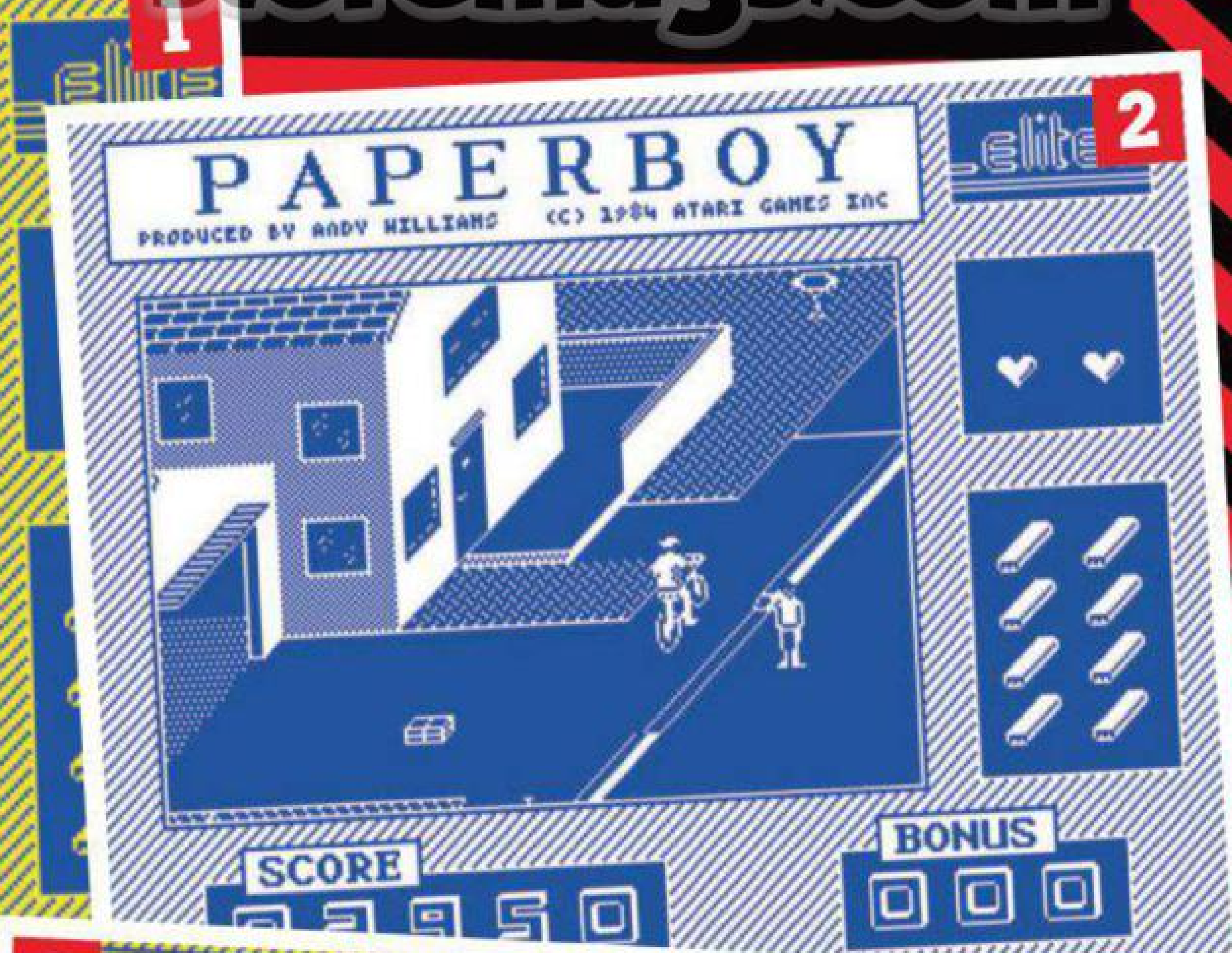
ARCADE

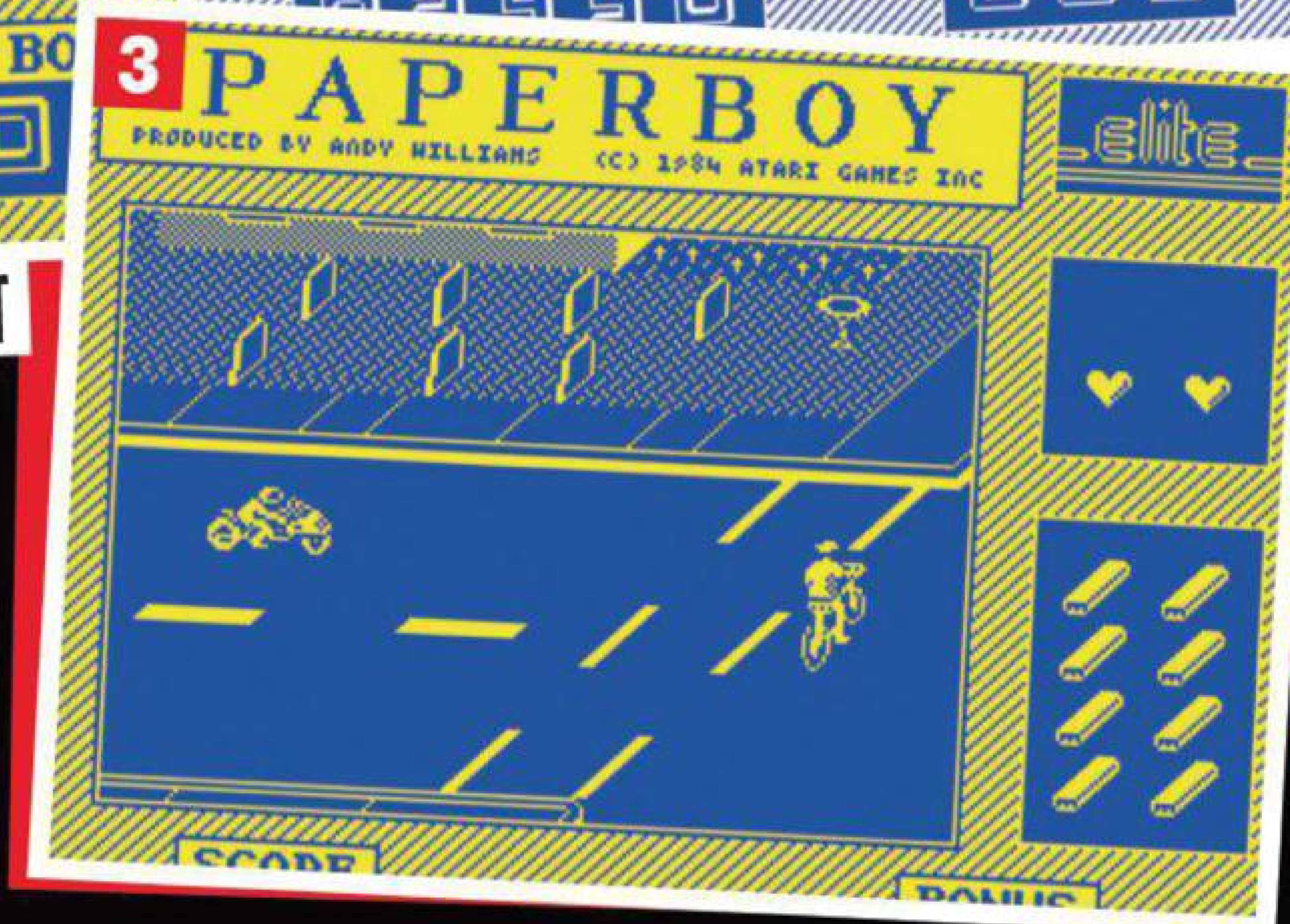


BBC MICRO









THE BREAKDOWN

1 The level design isn't a faithful replica of the arcade game. Every house seems to have its own graveyard. Either this version of *Paperboy* takes place in the murder capital of the world, or the residents have a pretty bizarre view of what passes for tasteful front lawn furniture.

2 The presentation is unfortunate. The playing field is swamped by this chunky border, which for a game like *Paperboy* isn't ideal. At least the colour scheme changes between stages – a small mercy, we guess – although the white does make the second street feel even more like a ghost town.

3 There's no music or digitised speech in this port; just bleeping sounds accompanying certain actions. Our tip, then: play it on a nice day, crack open a window, let the tweeting birds serenade you, and hope some kids accidentally kick a football through the window.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Mega Drive** Year: **1991** Publisher: **Tengen** Developer: **Movie Time, Ltd**





■ Handled and delivered with utmost care, this superb Mega Drive port was the home version to play. Not only does it look and sound the part (it features a great rendition of the classic tune and some good digitised speech too) but it also controls well and runs really smoothly.

THE COMPLETE HI



YEAR IN 19

1993 WAS A year of transition for the videogame industry – quite a difficult one as it turned out. The 8-bit home computer market was largely in decline due to the loss of both the ZX Spectrum and the Amstrad CPC range of systems. Both the BBC Micro and Commodore 64 bravely battled on, and while sales of games on both systems were definitely in decline due to the greater interest in the 16-bit market, there were still gems to be found, particularly on the C64, with titles like *Mayhem In Monsterland* and *Parsec* rivalling anything to be found on the home consoles everyone was flocking to.

If the 8-bit micros were slowly vanishing off the face of the Earth, it was proving to be an exciting but trying time for CD-ROM-based systems, with a relatively large number of machines getting launched around the world, but failing to properly establish themselves as the future of gaming. Things kicked off in April, with Sega finally deciding to release its Mega-CD in Europe, some 15 months after the add-on first made its debut in Japan. While Sega's add-on eventually went on to sell some 6 million units it is deemed a failure as it didn't even manage to reach a fifth of the 37 million gamers who already owned an original Mega Drive.

If consumers hadn't shown faith in Sega's CD-based add-on it seemed to matter little to publishers, with Tandy, Pioneer, Commodore, Goldstar, Sanyo and Panasonic all releasing their own home consoles that utilised newfangled CD-based technology.

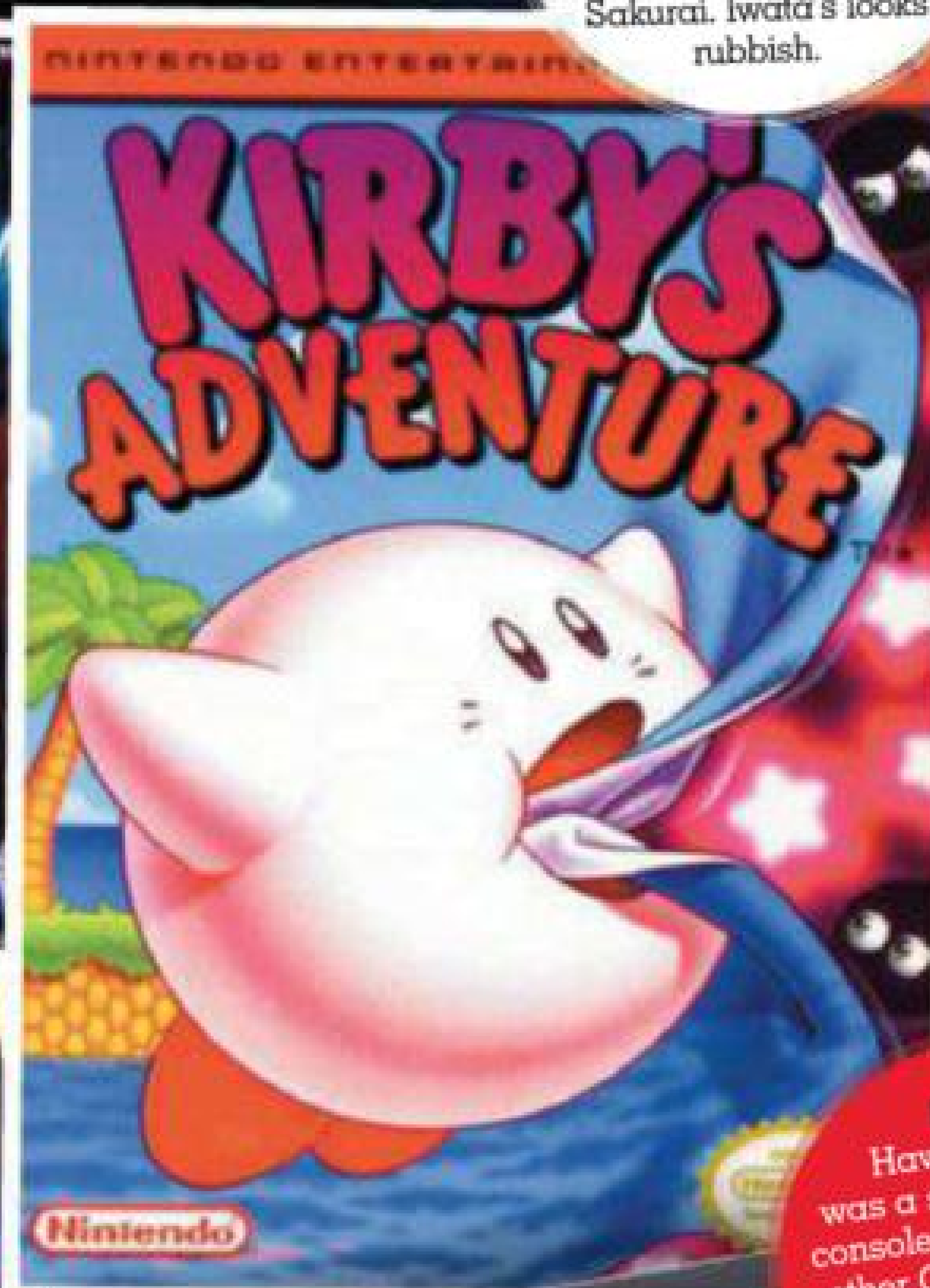
By far the most interesting was the ambitious 3DO, the brainchild of Electronic Arts founder Trip Hawkins. Hawkins had already had huge success in the console market after Electronic Arts reverse-engineered the Mega Drive, and he felt that the 3DO was the next logical step for the evolution of home consoles. The 3DO itself was manufactured by three different companies: Goldstar, Sanyo and Panasonic, while the low $3 royalty charge for each game was a far cheaper alternative to what Sega and Nintendo were offering. It was also largely region-free due to having no region locking or copy protection built into the hardware, with only a few specific Japanese titles not working on non-Japanese machines.

Like many other CD-ROM-based systems, the 3DO had its own share of FMV games, but it also boasted a number of genuinely enhanced PC ports, as well as original releases like Naughty Dog's *Way Of The Warrior*

The official strategy guide for *Kirby's Adventure* on the NES featured drawings of the then-little-known mascot by Shigeru Miyamoto, Satoru Iwata and *Kirby* creator Masahiro Sakurai. Iwata's looks rubbish.



Microcosm was an early example of hyped CD-ROM-based technology from Psygnosis that, despite receiving high scores from Amiga mags, never lived up to the promised hype.





The characters in *Starfox* amputate their legs so that blood doesn't drain from their brains from G-force. This is backed up by early artwork that clearly shows Fox's metallic feet.



Trip Hawkins' 3DO was a state-of-the-art console that, like many other CD-ROM-based machines, was pushed as a multimedia device on its launch.

STORY OF GAMES

and the excellent strategy title *Return Fire*. *Road Rash*, *Need For Speed* and *FIFA* showed just how cutting-edge the 3DO technology was, but the console was hamstrung by an incredibly high entry price of $699, although Hawkins has since stated it was actually $599. The system was eventually cancelled in 1996, but it remains of interest because in many ways it gave a glimpse into the future of videogames, thanks to its region-free approach and the idea of a universal set-top box to play games.



■ While the 8-bit computers were clearly running out of steam, genuinely great games like *Mayhem In Monsterland* were still being released on the Commodore 64.

■■■ Commodore's Amiga CD32 was another console that promised plenty, but ultimately failed to deliver. Wrongly marketed as the world's first 32-bit console (it was beaten to that particular punch by the FM Towns Marty seven months earlier), it was released as Commodore began its decline. Numerous issues meant the system never received an official US launch (it reached Canada though) and although the CD32 had a strong launch in Europe, many gamers were disappointed by its overreliance on (admittedly good) Amiga ports, which often had very little new content added to them. Indeed, many games were little more than a direct copy of the original Amiga release, while a lack of strong third-party support meant that there was little of the variety found on rival consoles. Despite selling extremely well in its first year – it actually gained more than 50 per cent of the CD-Rom game market in Britain the year it was launched – Commodore's financial troubles and its inability to keep up with demand meant that the machine was discontinued in May 1994 alongside the bankruptcy of Commodore International. It was on sale for just seven short months.





REVIEW 93

The final big console launch of 1993 was Atari Corporation's Jaguar. Despite being lauded as the first 64-bit console, Atari's machine was a huge disappointment, primarily due to a lack of third-party support and the difficulty of actually creating games for the system. While it featured some genuine classics, including *Alien Vs. Predator* and the fantastic *Tempest 2000*, the vast majority of original games for the system were incredibly poor, and Atari's inability to sell the console in high numbers meant it was unable to entice developers from working on rival consoles. Like many other systems Atari eventually embraced CD-ROM technology, but the Saturn and PlayStation were just around the corner, and although Atari Corp. tried valiantly, it was unable to compete with the two-punch assault that Sega and Sony would deliver between them the following year...



■ While there was still a big reliance on lengthy FMV, games like *The 7th Guest* proved that the storage capacity of CD-ROM could definitely enhance gameplay.

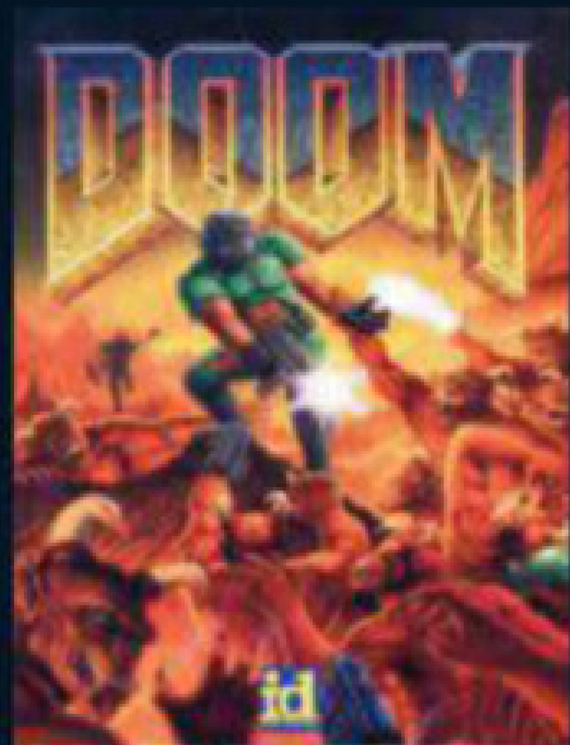




■ Commodore's CD32 was promising, but suffered from a roster of games that mainly comprised uninspired ports of standard Amiga titles.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Lawrence Holland

■ Lawrence Holland isn't a name that's familiar to many gamers, but he deserves mention here for being one of the few videogame designers to create a genuinely great *Star Wars* videogame franchise. Holland is the president of Totally Games and was the lead designer of the excellent *X-Wing* series. *X-Wing* perfectly captured the excitement of the *Star Wars* universe thanks to an engaging storyline and atmospheric space battles, and remains a firm favourite with PC retro gamers. It was followed up with numerous expansion packs and three hit standalone sequels including *TIE Fighter* and *X-Wing Alliance*, the latter of which is still heavily played to this day.





EXTENDED PLAY: **1993**

DOOM

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we examine the first-person shooter that defined a genre

PLAY ID SOFTWARE'S *Rage* for any length of time and beneath the impossibly shiny graphics it proves one thing – *Doom*'s impact on the first-person genre remains impossible to ignore. Away from all the cutting-edge visuals and interesting driving excursions, *Rage*'s base arcade-like mechanics and satisfying weaponry are so similar to *Doom*'s it's uncanny. This might not surprise some as both games are by the same developer, but it still highlights how *Doom* has continued to cast its considerable shadow over the popular genre for so long.

Of course, *Doom* wasn't the first first-person shooter – that honour goes to id Software's very own *Wolfenstein 3D* – but it was the first to truly popularise and define the genre, and its impact and influence on the first-person shooter continues to be felt to this day. An estimated 10 million people enjoyed *Doom* when it was first released as shareware. We can only imagine how many gamers have experienced it since then. It even made a huge impact on Valve, with Gabe Newell adopting a business model of bringing innovation to the table above all else, after discovering *Doom* was the most installed piece of software on office PCs when he was still working at Microsoft.

And that's the real beauty of *Doom*. Although it wasn't first to the table, everything it did, it did incredibly well. The annoying maze-like labyrinths of *Wolfenstein 3D* had been replaced by tight, meticulously designed levels, the creepy lighting effects created an incredible ambient atmosphere, a trick that's still being used today in titles like *Aliens Vs. Predator* and id's own *Rage*, while networked online play set the groundwork for not only id Software's well-respected *Quake* series, but big modern-day hitters like *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield*. Explosive barrels could be shot to destroy nearby monsters, foes would even turn on each other in tight enclosed spaces, game modding was commonplace, and the fast-paced arcade-style gameplay was utterly mesmerising.

DOOM'S IMPACT ON THE FIRST-PERSON GENRE IS IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE



For many, though, *Doom*'s mastery lies in its weapons – the oh-so-satisfying-to-fire weapons. There's a scene in *Predator*'s Blu-ray commentary where director John McTiernan discusses the scene where Arnie and his men are impotently firing into the jungle, calling it gun porn. *Doom* is also gun porn; simplistically stylising its many weapons into a

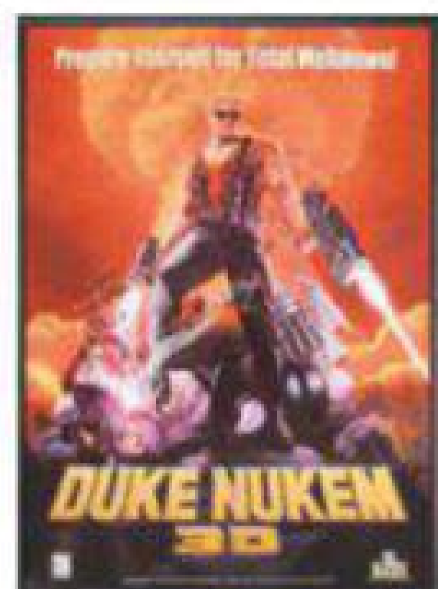


After the frustrating map designs of *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*'s levels were a joy to rush through.



Doom was so popular it was revisited by id Software several times. *Ultimate Doom* is generally considered to be the best version.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ *DOOM* QUITE simply revolutionised a genre, spawning a huge number of clones throughout the following years, many of which were created using the *Doom* engine.

Raven Software released *Heretic* in 1994 and followed it up with *Hexen* in 1995, both of which were published by id Software. Both games were steeped in fantasy, and saw the player being able to wield various spells and magical items instead of the military weaponry prevalent in *Doom*.

id Software would visit the world of Gothic fantasy with the release of the seminal *Quake*, while companies such as Apogee took a more tongue-in-cheek approach with *Duke Nukem 3D*. Other notable clones of the Nineties included the *Star Wars* spin-off *Dark Forces*, the story-driven *Marathon* and *Half-Life*, and Rare's excellent *GoldenEye*. id itself released two sequels – *Doom II: Hell On Earth* in 1995 and *Doom 3* in 2008. An eagerly-awaited fourth game is currently in development.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR...

RIDGE RACER



■ NAMCO'S blisteringly fast-paced racer was a massive deal in arcades the world over thanks to its sickening sense of speed, beautifully designed tracks and funky J-Pop tunes. Its gargantuan popularity easily ensured it received a home console port, with Sony's PlayStation receiving it as a launch title for the system.

STARFOX



■ ARGONAUT'S FIRST SNES game was a game changer on the machine, due to it being the first to use the innovative Super FX chip. The result was a frantic shoot-'em-up that featured the first 3D Polygon graphics on Nintendo's 16-bit console. It also introduced gamers to hero Fox McCloud.

SECRET OF MANA



■ SQUARE'S SEQUEL to *Seiken Densetsu* remains one of the best SNES's best RPGs. It's an innovative release due to its distinctive ring-based menu system, and the ability to play through the adventure with up to two other players courtesy of the Super Nintendo's Super Multitap peripheral.

SYNDICATE



■ BULLFROG'S SYNDICATE was an epic real-time strategy game that perfectly captured the cyberpunk atmosphere of *Blade Runner* and *Shadowrun*. The isometric viewpoint allowed for detailed buildings, while the weaponry, along with the ability to enhance your squad of four cyborgs, offered plenty of longevity.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING



■ THERE ARE some *Zelda* purists out there who deem this, and not *A Link To The Past*, to be the best 2D adventure. It's easy to see why, as *Link's Awakening* really does push the boundaries for portable gaming. A deluxe version with an additional dungeon was released in 1998 on Game Boy Color.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: Super Famicom Box
YEAR: Unknown
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £1,000+



EXHIBIT A: The fabled Super Famicom Box cartridge, proof it does exist. Around four times larger than standard Super Nintendo carts, it would be pretty hard to mislay one.



EXHIBIT B: Cartridges are inserted into the front of the console, which has a lock mechanism to hold them securely and prevent them from being stolen by players.



EXHIBIT C: Though Jens owns a PSS-64, he doesn't have a complete collection. He's missing a PSS-63, which features *Super Tetris 2* and *Super Donkey Kong*.

PSS-64 SUPER FAMICOM BOX CART

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

CREATED FOR use in the hospitality industry, the Super Famicom Box was a unique Super Famicom variant that enabled games to be played on vend. The systems were only released in Japan where they were mostly found in hotels. Not compatible with standard Super Famicom cartridges, they instead have a very small library of bespoke interchangeable cartridges preloaded with a selection of SNES titles.

Known to collectors by their serial numbers, it was long-assumed that only three Super Famicom Box cartridges were produced: PSS-61, which came shipped with the systems and featured *Super Mario Kart*, *Super Mario All-Stars* and *Star Fox*; PSS-62, which included the games *Super Mahjong 2* and *Golf* (the only exclusive SFB title); and PSS-63, which contained *Super Tetris 2* and *Super Donkey Kong* (*Donkey Kong Country*).

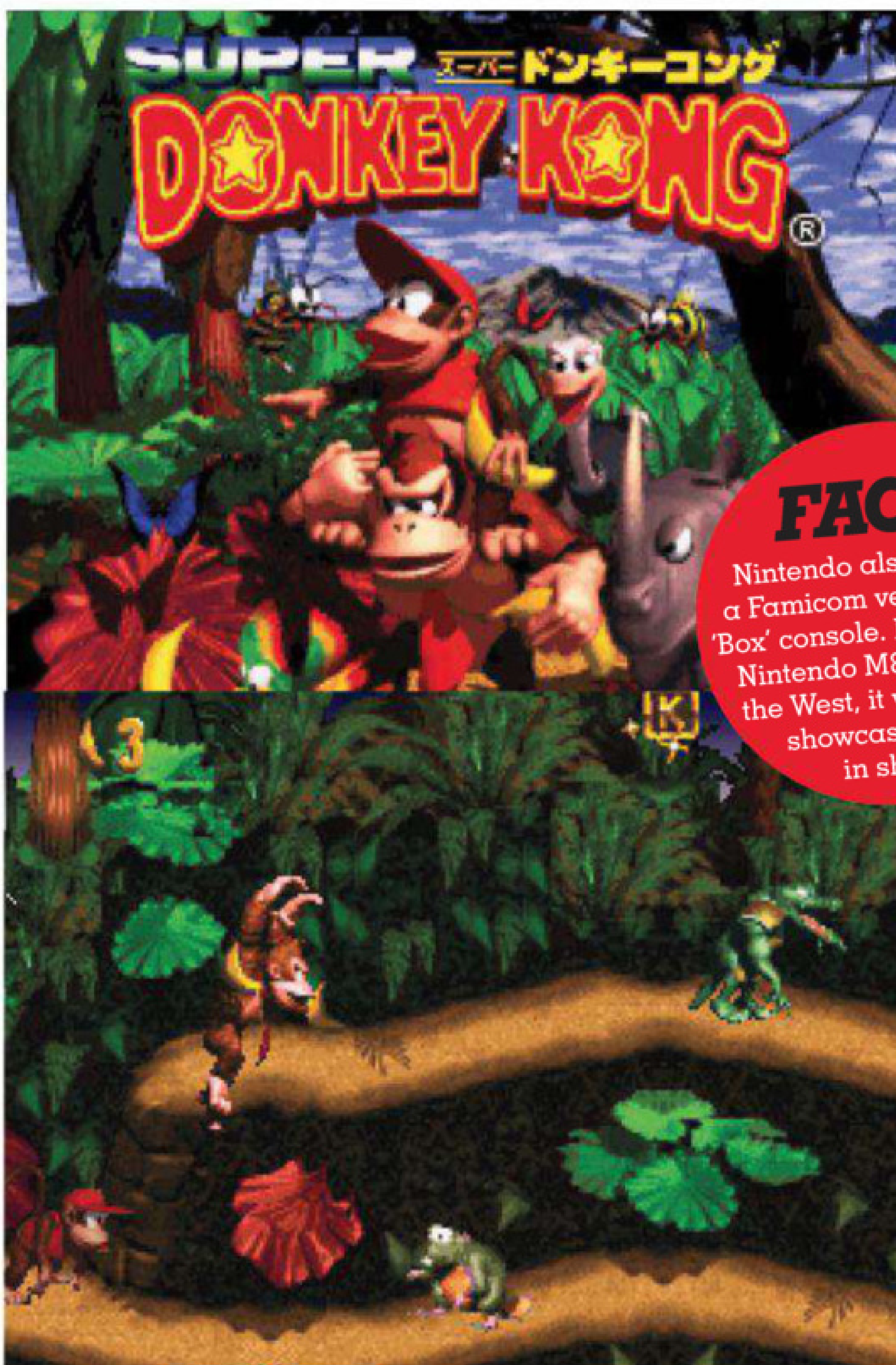
Production of a fourth cartridge said to contain *Super Donkey Kong* and *Super Bomberman 2* was rumoured, but as Nintendo had never officially confirmed its release it had led many to doubt its existence. That is until this month's sharp-eyed collector spotted a cartridge for sale on an online Japanese games shop. Knowing how rare a find this was, he quickly secured it and has finally confirmed the existence of this long-hidden cart.



Worth Playing?

DONKEY KONG Country and *Super Bomberman 2* are certainly worth playing. The former is one of the best platform games of the 16-bit era; it completely reinvigorated the *Donkey Kong* franchise and went on to become one of the best-selling games on Super Nintendo. While the latter doesn't do anything particularly groundbreaking with the familiar and well-worn *Bomberman* formula, it's still an entertaining sequel, and if you throw a multitap into the mix a really good party game too. On the face of it, then, the PSS-64 cart is a decent double-pack. Well, that is until you consider the practicalities.

With the cartridges being so rare and Super Famicom Boxes also uncommon, the cartridges hold little worth to anyone that isn't a hardcore Nintendo or Super Famicom Box collector. That the PSS-64 cart is only compatible with Super Famicom Boxes means you'll need to already own or invest in a machine to play it on. If you also factor in the console's tiny library of games – of which all bar one were released on standard Super Famicom/Nintendo consoles – potentially putting collectors off the machine, this all combines to make the PSS-64 cart one of the most specialist and niche items to feature in Collector's Corner.



FACT!
Nintendo also released a Famicom version of the 'Box' console. Known as the Nintendo M82 system in the West, it was used to showcase games in shops.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Jens Sommer**
Occupation: **Chemist**

What is it about the Super Famicom Box that is attractive to you?
It's the fact that this version of the Super Famicom was only made for Japanese hotels. This, of course, makes them relatively rare outside of Japan. In 2005 I lived in Japan for half a year, so I dived into the depth of Tokyo's Akihabara electronic district and set about getting all detailed information on Japan-only retro videogame systems.

Please tell us how/where you found the cart.
I was in a Famicom forum last year and noticed a Japanese guy placing a link to his online shop. I checked the items and discovered that he had a Super Famicom Box including the carts PSS-61 (which is built-in to every system) and the never-officially-released PSS-64 cart. At that time I already owned a Super Famicom Box, but I wanted the PSS-64 cart so much that I bought the whole system.

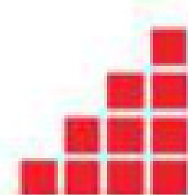
What condition was the cart in and how much did you pay for it?
Incredibly I paid only $80 US, plus $20 US shipping to my friend in Tokyo. When it was brought across to Germany I opened the Super Famicom Box and removed the PSS-64 cart. The second Super Famicom Box I then sold on eBay for €200. So if you sum it up I did not pay anything. Instead, I earned approximately €120.

Do you actually play on the cart and, if so, what do you think of it?
Honestly, I don't have much time (and own 20 game systems), but from time to time I do enjoy the nostalgia of playing retro games.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the cart?
To be fair, I have already received an offer from a member of a Super Nintendo forum. I was offered around €1,200, which I rejected. I would only consider selling this item at a price of €3,000, but I doubt that someone would be willing to pay that much for the cart only.

Late last year, Blaze announced a retro gamer's dream console, the GameGadget. One device and a library of thousands of retro games from every format you can think of… it sounded too good to be true. And it was…

Why GameGadget Disappoints



GAMEGADGET is not the iTunes of retro gaming. Back in issue 117, we described the concept of GameGadget as such in the title of a piece about the device. We wanted to run an intriguing piece about an exciting idea. We wanted to believe there could be such a thing as an iTunes for retro games. But if there is such a thing, this isn't it.

Almost everything iTunes *is* – accessible, intuitive, comprehensive, frequently updated, reliable, high quality – GameGadget is *not*. The machine was released in early April and we didn't receive a unit for review for nearly two months. Why not? It's hard to say why it took so long, but we can see why Blaze didn't want us to get our hands on one at launch. GameGadget wasn't usable at launch. At all.

To be used, every GameGadget has to be registered and activated using software downloaded from GameGadget.net, but this software simply was not ready for the product's launch. It wasn't even ready a week later. What a review that would have been!

It was ready and available by the time we received our GameGadget, but we're not convinced it's working properly. For complicated office IT security reasons we registered our GameGadget on a different computer to the one on which we receive e-mails, so when we were e-mailed our six-character validation code, we had to memorise it then walk to a different desk. We typed it in and got an error message, so we checked the e-mail again and discovered we'd memorised it wrong. Bizarrely, when we returned to the PC on which we were registering the GameGadget, it had apparently decided that our guess was close enough after all and the activation process had started. Very odd.

Another known bug at launch meant that your GameGadget wouldn't work properly if you didn't have a set of headphones plugged into it when you switched it on. Blaze even sent out early units with a free set of headphones for this purpose along with a letter that read:

"The bug created a big dilemma for us, but we wanted to hit the street date, as closely as possible. We have express delivered the stock from Asia in record time at significant cost. I hope you agree we made the right decision."

We don't. Better to release a finished product later than to release a less-functional-than-promised product on time.

CURIOUSLY, THE UNIT we were sent had a headphone-related bug of its own. The reset function gets stuck in a loop when you have headphones connected. It won't actually start up fully until you unplug them.

Resetting, by the way, is something we've had to do a lot. In order to quit a game, you have to press both shoulder buttons and Start

To be this bad takes… about six months

22 November 2011
Blaze announces the GameGadget, comparing it to the iPod. Games are to be "around £1.99".

January 2012
The GameGadget is supposed to launch, selling through a dedicated website at £99.99, but it doesn't.

29 March 2012
The GG website states that the 30 free Mega Drive games you get with pre-orders are worth a total of £149.70, or £4.99 per game.

6 April 2012
GameGadget launches with only the confirmed Mega Drive titles and no activation software. The software is promised soon.

19 April 2012
Blaze changes the price of GameGadget games again, this time to £2.99 each or £9.99 for ten.

27 April 2012
The price of the GameGadget drops from £99.99 to £59.99, and a new forum is launched on the product's web site.

simultaneously, but with some games this doesn't work, so resetting is your only option.

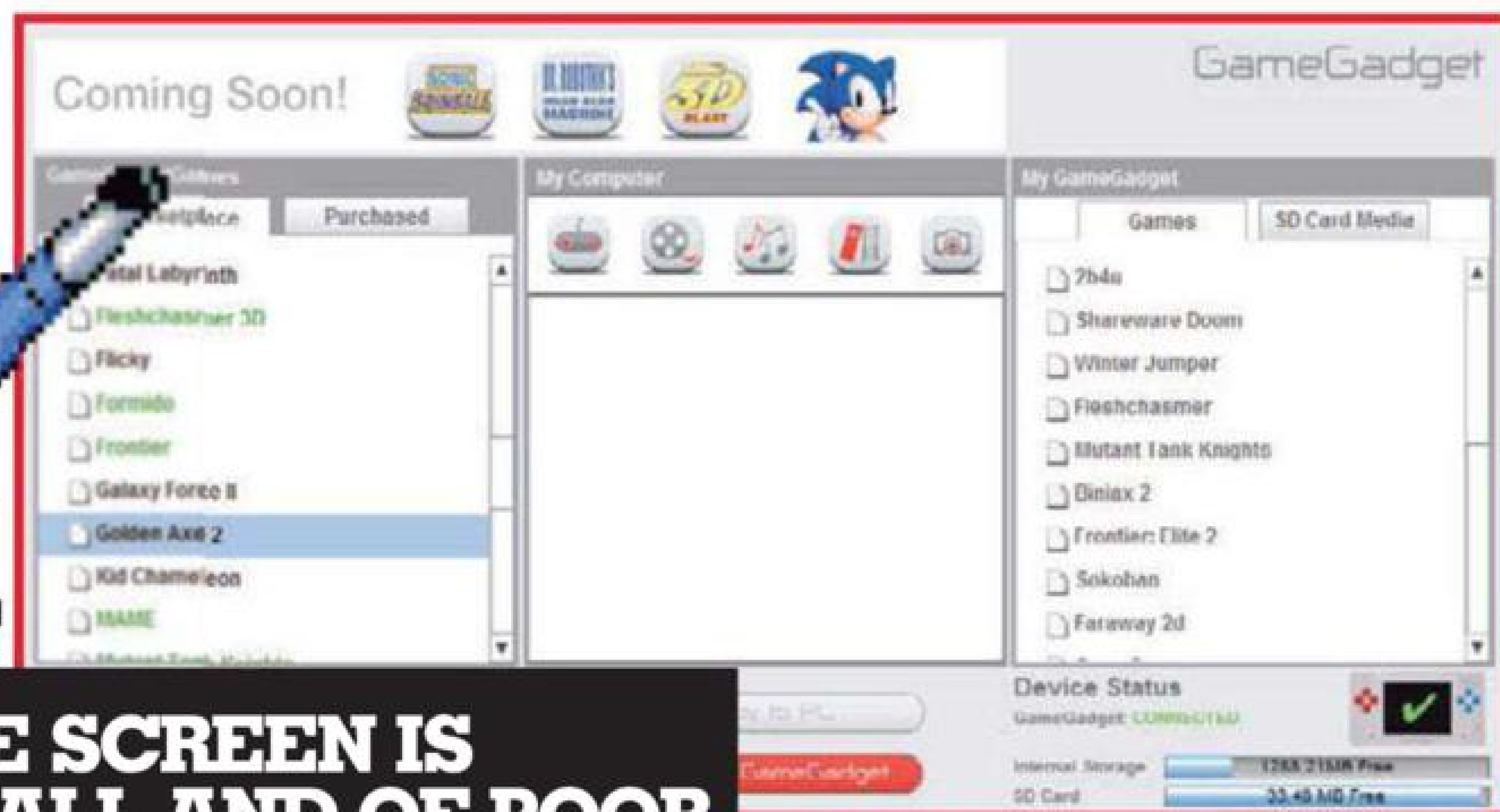
We had to do a lot of quitting and/or resetting at first just to get the volume to a comfortable level. There's no physical volume control on the hardware so you have to adjust it via the settings menu, taking a guess at how loud the actual in-game sound is going to be. We had to take several guesses and several restarts before we got the volume we wanted. It wasn't fun.



Anyway, once our GameGadget was activated we were able to see the full range of games now available on the official GameGadget shop. Now, *this* is what's really angering customers. Comparing this meagre offering to iTunes is just rude. There are about 30 or so Mega Drive games, typically priced at £2.99, that are already available built-in to Blaze's Mega Drive handhelds, and a selection of freeware titles. Most of these are homebrew, but *Doom* and *Frontier: Elite II* have shown up too. A version of MAME (Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator) is also available through the shop, along with absolutely no MAME ROMs to run on it, for obvious reasons.

Customers and potential customers have been so disappointed by the lack of content on the GameGadget store that many have directed their questions and complaints to the official GameGadget forum and Facebook page, only to have their posts deleted en masse.

When we asked Blaze for a statement, we were told: "We are either in dialogue or attempting to speak with all the major hardware platform holders and game publishers. The different [sic] between GG and other similar devices is that we want to create an environment whereby users pay for content. Publishers are being slow to understand this, so we have changed our business model with them to increase their royalty to 70 per cent. This has increased the number of publishers we are speaking to. Our fear is that GG users get tired of waiting for publishers to provide content and just download content from the internet for free, as they currently do on a PC, Dingoo, hacked PSP, Android or other devices that handle digital content."



THE SCREEN IS SMALL AND OF POOR QUALITY, AND THE SOUND IS AWFUL

SOUNDS LIKE GAME publishers figured out that GameGadget needs them more than they need GameGadget, and this has rather taken Blaze by surprise. We're not really getting the answers we're looking for, but at least this representative's response was more polite than: "I think you are already barking up the wrong tree, I shan't warn you again. If you want to keep moaning please close the door on your way out."

This is what GameGadget forum administrator 'xploderadmin' told a customer when he asked for clarifications on what games are coming to the shop. And the same admin in the same post also directed users to a multi-platform emulator pack for GameGadget posted on Dingoonity.org. The pack includes numerous formats for which there are no available games on the GameGadget store, which begs the question: where is 'xploderadmin' suggesting users get their ROMs from? Rudely dismissing GG users and directing them to an application that facilitates the use of free content looks, to us, to be encouraging exactly the kind of behaviour our spokesperson told us Blaze is afraid of. Mixed messages here, to say the least.



The trouble is that even if there were thousands of retro games available to buy at reasonable prices and download in an iTunes-esque manner, and even if GameGadget had been released in a finished, bug-free state, it *still* wouldn't be very good. The screen is small and of poor quality and the sound is awful, with a background buzz noticeable at all times. It even *feels* cheap and nasty – all ugly plastic moulding and spongy, old-fashioned buttons.

In fact, the only thing about GameGadget that isn't well below par is the box it comes in. The box, we have to admit, is very nice. It is, in fact, the iTunes of cardboard boxes.

Other than that, everything needs to improve. Blaze needs to get publishers on board and sell their games for no more than £2 each via a convenient and flexible online marketplace. Then it needs to spend time and money designing and manufacturing a unit that feels good to use, and continue to provide ongoing support to the product and its users.

Will any of this happen? Or will Blaze just sell off all the GameGadgets it's already made as fast as possible then try and forget the whole thing ever happened? We couldn't possibly say. We'd still love for the iTunes of retro gaming to exist. But for now we're still waiting…

1 May 2012 Today's the day of the GameGadget Store's grand opening, but nothing happens.

5 May 2012 The 'grand opening' finally happens, but amounts to a handful of freeware games added to the Mega Drive titles that everyone's already sick of the sight of.

9 May 2012 A Facebook post claims CD32 games will be available once the emulation has been perfected. Three weeks later, the post is deleted and the games don't materialise.

10 May 2012 GG posts on Twitter: "@Lord_Sugar we would like to license the use of Amstrad and ZX Spectrum for our new handheld games console, who would we speak to?" Lord Sugar does not reply.

24 May 2012 It is announced that GameGadget is now being distributed by Xploder. Blaze and Xploder are two different brands of the same company, so it's not clear what difference this makes.

25 May 2012 Blaze closes then re-opens both GG's Facebook page and forum. Admins begin dishing out rudeness and bannings. A freeware version of *Doom* is added to the online shop.



The RETRO Guide To...



Celebrating its 15th anniversary, Fallout is a rare series – one that started out revolutionary and continued to evolve. **games™** sat down with Brian Fargo, Tim Cain, Feargus Urquhart, Todd Howard and Chris Avellone to discuss the making of every core Fallout game so far



1997 – FALLOUT

What's the connection between *Fallout* and its spiritual predecessor, *Wasteland*?

Brian Fargo: The only reason there was a *Fallout* was because I was unable to acquire the rights from EA to make a *Wasteland 2*. *Fallout* was my direct response to that situation and we captured many elements from *Wasteland* in the *Fallout* series.

Tim Cain: I had not played *Wasteland* before I started work on *Fallout*, but a lot of the team had played it and of course, there were people like Alan Pavlish and Bill Heineman around the office who had actually worked on the game. We liked to talk about what features we enjoyed in the game, such as its morally vague quests and its open world, and we debated about party-based combat and super loot squares. In the end, we were inspired by *Wasteland*, but *Fallout* was more of a re-imagining of the post-nuclear genre.

Fantasy RPGs had been the bread and butter of the genre since *Dungeons & Dragons*. What inspired the post-apocalyptic sci-fi theme?

Brian Fargo: *The Road Warrior* is one of my favourite movies of all time and I have always personally had strong feelings about the genre. I used to read *Kamandi: The Last Boy On Earth* as a kid, *The Omega Man* was one of my favourite movies and *The Swan Song* is still a top book for me. I have always been fascinated by a reset of mankind to a sort of dark ages but with technology.

What aspects of the RPG genre were you attempting to improve or overhaul with *Fallout*?

Tim Cain: I wanted a big open world, and I wanted the player to decide who his character was and how he would act, not the designer. I wanted quests and the main storyline to have multiple solutions and endings, not only to encourage replayability, but to support whatever decisions the player has made. The fact that later games emulated some of these design choices tells me that we made the right decisions.

By 1997, other PC RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls* had already made the leap to 3D. Why did *Fallout* stay 2D?

Tim Cain: The games I loved at the time, like *X-COM* or *Crusader*, were isometric. I like the way an isometric view gives the player the ability to see the field of combat in a way that first person does not. And as far as 2D versus 3D goes, at that time in the mid-Nineties you could not get anywhere near the level of detail in a character using a 3D model as you could in a sprite.

Brian, do you know why the deal to use Steve Jackson's GURPS RPG system fell through mid-development?

Brian Fargo: Yes, I know exactly how it fell through since I am the one that pulled the trigger on it. We had sent Mr. Jackson a snippet of the opening movie that had the citizen being shot in the back of the head while the music from the Ink Spots played. Well, Mr. Jackson was very opposed to the violence and insisted we remove it and I was unwilling to do so, so we agreed to part ways. I respect his desire to have his licence associated with whatever material he wanted, but I knew the tone of *Fallout* was going to be harsher than the opening movie so I saw no point in moving forward. My thought at the time was, 'You haven't seen anything yet.'

Feargus Urquhart: In the end, we decided to go our separate ways, and in a couple of weeks three or four of us came up with an entirely new RPG system for the game – SPECIAL. We then had to retrofit the game to use the new





Fallout's interactive dialogue is a cornerstone of the series and has only improved on its quality origins with time.

system, which was much easier than we had anticipated because of how both Tim Cain and Chris Jones had architected the game.

How did the original GURPS system differ to the SPECIAL system we're now familiar with?
Tim Cain: GURPS was a lot more complex than SPECIAL, and that meant we received a lot of feedback from QA as the testers strove to understand these complexities. I remember one tester asked me why some characters could shoot better than others, even though they had the same points in the Guns skill. I told him that his Dexterity stat played a part in the final calculation but he got a bonus from his Intelligence stat too, but the two stats were applied differently. He was unhappy at this answer, and I remember being worried that the system might be too complex for many players.

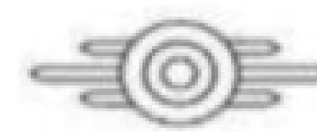
And what did you prefer about the SPECIAL system?
Tim Cain: The simplicity of SPECIAL made it easy to code and easy to explain to other people, but it still allowed for a rich diversity of characters to be made. And the fact that it was home-grown for our game made it endearing to me. I had to fight a little to get Luck in there, though. A few people didn't like this stat, claiming it was too vague, but I liked giving the player a little control over the 'unknowable' in the game – things like critical hits, discoveries and encounters.

> "I wanted a big open world, and I wanted the player to decide who his character was and how he would act, not the designer"

What would you say was the biggest challenge of creating *Fallout*?
Tim Cain: I had never made anything so ambitiously big before. Since I didn't get a team to start out with, I had to write an engine, which included the blitters, the animation controllers, the timers, the event handlers, the sound system, the input layer, everything. On top of that there was creating an original IP, developing a storyline, and inventing characters and quests, but luckily people were joining the *Fallout* group by then. As if that was not enough, I was the producer as well, so I was expected to make reports and manage schedules. Frankly, I would have collapsed if someone had told me all of the stuff I was expected to do. Instead, I just barged ahead and got things done.

All that hard work was worth it though…
Chris Avellone: The finished game was revolutionary. It changed what I thought RPGs could be. It had so many brilliant design choices, such as intelligence affecting dialogue, Perks, and even minor elements like planting explosives with Pickpocket, and it had a big impact on how I did dialogue design in *Planescape: Torment*. The idea of checking so many skills and abilities and then causing Karma/alignment changes in mechanics and in the attitude of the person you were talking to was important to me, and *Fallout* was the title that opened my eyes to the possibilities.

Feargus Urquhart: The biggest achievement of *Fallout* was to really put people in another world where they got to play the kind of role they wanted to play. Most previous RPGs had let you play classes like *Fighter* or *Thief*, but those classes all really came down to how the player's character did damage. In *Fallout* you could play a Combat character, a Thief Character or a Talking Character, and the game supported you winning while acting in one of those roles. *Fallout* let you beat the end boss without firing a shot.



1998 – FALLOUT 2

***Fallout 2* was made at Interplay, just like the first game, but it was made by an almost entirely new team. Why?**
Brian Fargo: *Fallout 2* was a very different team dynamic and the guys did a wonderful job considering the difficulty of the circumstances. The original producer and art director originally didn't want to make the sequel, so we put a new team in place to handle the job. But then the original guys changed their mind and we had to toss out a lot of work that was done which was somewhat demoralising. And then after a short time they changed their mind and



decided to leave the company, throwing things back into disarray. It was very frustrating and I give major credit to Chris and Feargus for keeping it together and keeping the team inspired.

How did the team change affect the game's development?

Feargus Urquhart: I hate to say that it didn't have much of a change, but I am going to say that anyway. But, that is not a slight at all to the talent of Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky and Jason Anderson. What they and all of us had done with *Fallout* was to create such a complete and fleshed out world that *Fallout 2* almost made itself. Now it was a ton of work that we had to do very quickly to make our ship date, but the foundation was already there from *Fallout 1*.

Tim, what were your aspirations for *Fallout 2* before you left Interplay, and to what extent would you say these were realised by the finished product?

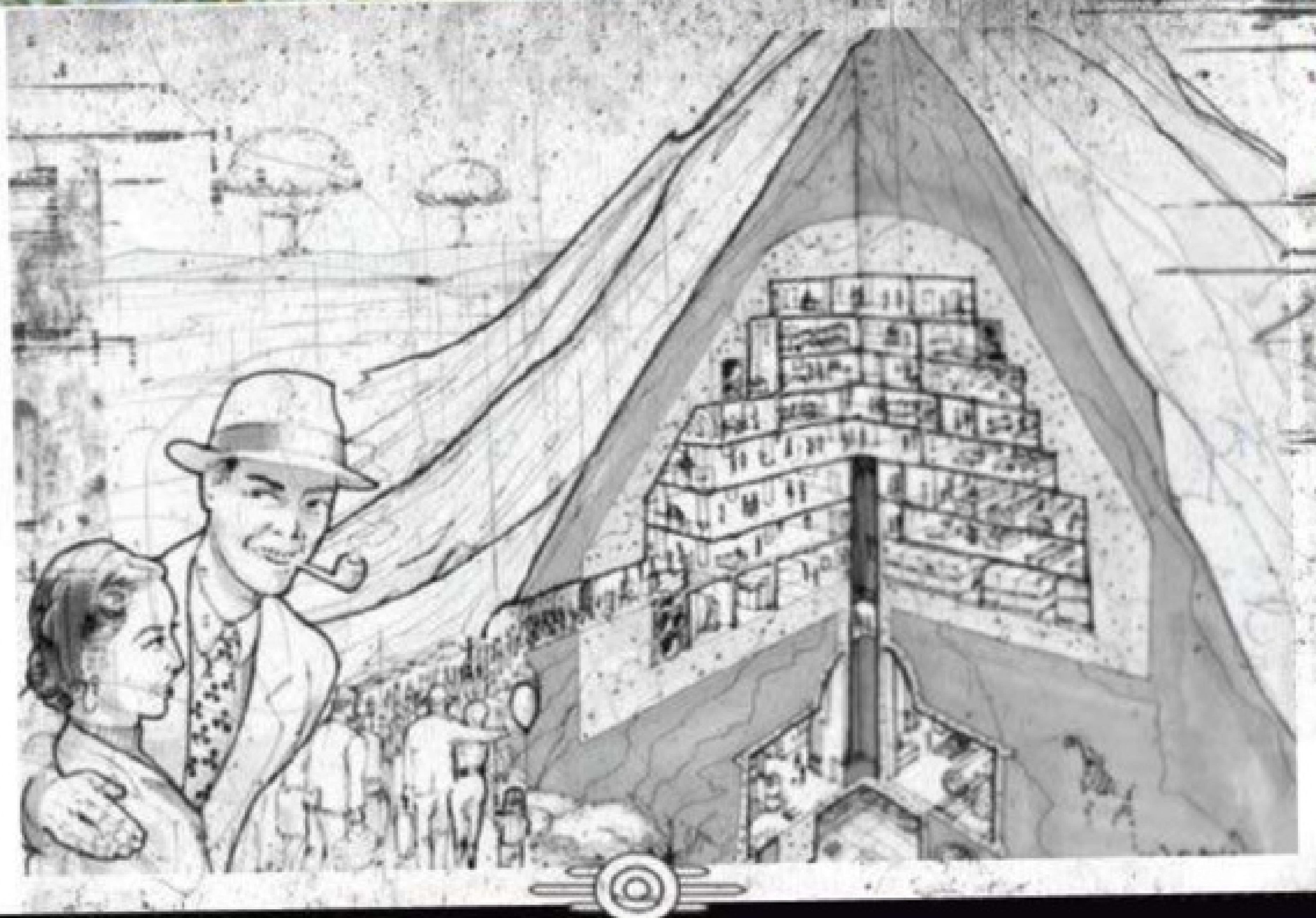
Tim Cain: I wanted to polish the game, meaning I wanted to clear out the bugs and also smooth some of the clunkier user interface elements. And I wanted to add some new big features, like a player-owned car and also a roving encounter on the world map. This encounter was big and dangerous, but you could get good items from it. And once you encountered it, you could predict where to find it again. Obviously, that never got done.

If *Fallout* laid the foundations for the mechanics of the series then *Fallout 2* is where its fictional side really came to life, right?

Tim Cain: Before *Fallout* had shipped, the idea of why the Vaults were made was brewing in my head. Even if a thousand of them were built, at huge expense, they would only house a million people or less than 0.5 per cent of the population of the country. So I imagined that the Vaults had another purpose besides just saving people, and I made a list of what kinds of Vaults might be built. Those ideas were developed in sequels.

Chris, as a writer what was it about the *Fallout* universe that you enjoyed working in?

Chris Avellone: On a minor level, I enjoy writing dialogue that can use 'hell' instead of 'hells', and 'Fuck this shit' instead of 'By the Gods!' On a larger level, *Fallout* had enough real-world ties that made the interactions more meaningful and relatable by comparison. Lastly, the fact that there were so many different ways to solve a



The Vaults of the Wasteland - And the real reason they existed

0 Combined the brains of all America's geniuses to create a supercomputer called 'The Calculator'. Which went rogue.

3 A control vault, designed to be closed for 20 years. It was kept closed too long and flooded.

8 A control vault, which opened after ten years so the residents could rebuild civilisation.

11 A control vault, which opened after ten years so the residents could rebuild civilisation.

12 The doors were not adequately sealed before The Great War, resulting in the ghoul enclave of Necropolis.

13 Designed to stay closed for 200 years to test human responses to isolation.

15 This Vault was deliberately overcrowded, and filled with a explosively diverse range of races and ideologies.

17 This Vault's inhabitants were turned into super mutants by The Master's Army. Its exact location and purpose is unknown.

19 Split inhabitants into two separate factions, with both groups made as paranoid of the other as possible.

21 All inhabitants shared equal power, and all disagreements were resolved through gambling.

22 Housed genetically altered spores, which mutated the Vault's inhabitants into Swamp Thing-like plant monsters.

34 The armoury was heavily overstocked with weapons and ammo, but wasn't locked.

76 This control Vault is mentioned in *Fallout 3* and, though undiscovered, expected to be somewhere in Pittsburgh.

77 Populated by a single man and a crate of puppets. The man's jumpsuit can be found in Paradise Falls.

87 Inhabitants were exposed to a Forced Evolutionary Virus. The resulting super mutants killed everyone else.

92 An attempt to create super soldiers using subliminal messages hidden in white noise.

101 Designed to stay closed indefinitely, this Vault housed the Vault Dweller, and was opened loads.

106 Psychoactive drugs were pumped in with the air, turning the inhabitants insane.

108 Filled with a dozen surviving clones, all called Gary, this Vault originally had a terminally ill Overseer, and no predetermined power structure for after his death.

112 Inhabitants are suspended in a virtual reality computer simulation from which they cannot escape.

STATS ITEMS DATA

Fallout and Fallout 2 are available on GOG.com but Todd Howard tells us he'd love to see remakes on XBLA or iPad.

THE SPIN-OFFS

FALLOUT TACTICS

"Frankly, I am amazed that the game ever got made," says Ed Orman, designer of *Fallout Tactics*. "We had a team built from mostly noobs, myself included, a lead programmer who bailed not long after we started, a short development cycle coupled with an ambitious design, the communications problems of working across different time zones, a fanbase that was dubious about what we were doing, a publisher who might not entirely have believed in our abilities. The odds were so stacked against us, it's just astounding.

"The idea for *Tactics* came from Interplay, after we pitched a demo of a different game that happened to use an isometric engine," Orman tells us. "The engine impressed them enough that they asked us to put together a proposal for a more combat-centric *Fallout* game."

To do that, Micro Forté received some help from Interplay, but it wasn't enough. "We did get access to Chris Taylor and Chris Avellone - thanks guys! - and they both did their best to steer us in the right direction. But if you ask some fans, their involvement wasn't enough. I still think we managed to capture the spirit of *Fallout*, but we certainly slipped up on some of the details." Nevertheless, Orman's studio was able to take *Fallout* and transform it into a different sort of RPG, which remains the most overlooked game in the series. While Orman tells us he'd love to see a remake of the game on iPad, don't hold your breath. "That'd be a huge amount of work, and I have no idea who owns the rights any more. Interplay, Bethesda?" For now, the PC version is available through Steam or on GOG.com.



FALLOUT: BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL

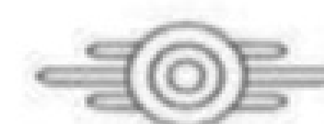
Fallout made its console debut with this top-down PS2 shooter. Though *Brotherhood Of Steel* uses some RPG elements, such as the SPECIAL system, it is a more action-based game with linear progression rather than open-world quests. Though it has since been declared non-canonical by Bethesda, it does feature many connections to the other games, including the appearance of the first game's Vault Dweller, who can be selected as a playable character in New Game+. *Brotherhood Of Steel* ran on the Snowblind engine - like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* - and was typical of the thinking of the time, that console RPGs had to be less deep. It took *Fallout 3*, among others, to challenge those perceptions.



quest based on skills and abilities enriched the role-playing experience. Dialogue was not just exposition and words, but a tool and a weapon you could use to reach your objectives, and that made me love it even more.

What were the major challenges of creating such interactive fiction so early in the genre's evolution?

Chris Avellone: Tracking the data and variables is the most difficult aspect of it. We hadn't done a title with that much reactivity before, so it required careful management of information among designers. Every area brief contained specific reactivity and hooks in-between the areas – we had the opportunity to go beyond that, and did, but having those initial connections laid out from the outset was a plus. The positive was that we'd been through the ringer at the studio with *Fallout*, so now we had an opportunity to use tricks and lessons with dialogues and quests to make them even richer. You could assassinate someone by planting explosives on a kid and then sending the kid to go talk to his parents; we could create more complicated dialogues; we had designers more prone to writing reactive barks and batch files to make implementing those dialogues easier, which really allowed much more content to be generated.



2008 – FALLOUT 3

Todd, what was it about this series in particular that attracted Bethesda to it?

Todd Howard: The setting was the first thing. I love the idea of Vault-Tec, the whole retro-sci-fi Fifties world that was destroyed. The other is that it fit the style of game we like the best. One where you are free to explore, do what you want, and are rewarded for that.

What aspects of the series did you look to keep and/or throw away?

Todd Howard: It's easy to say we wanted to preserve all of it and overhaul all of it at the same time. The first game's brilliant, we were just coming at the franchise ten years later, and you take a fresh look and ask yourself, 'What can we do to make you feel the same way you felt ten years ago?' Time and technology change how you make games and how audiences feel while playing them.

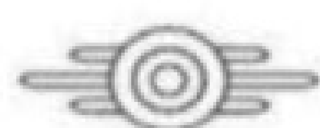
Was there anything you wanted to do that didn't make the final game?

Todd Howard: There isn't one part that we didn't redo and redo until we felt it was right.

From Pip-Boy designs, vault suits, weapons, VATS, to the world itself. We cut half our city spaces. We cut a surgery system. We were pushing a 'survival' feel often, and sometimes it went too far, so we would add and remove parts.

Your greatest contribution to *Fallout* is arguably the VATS system. Where did the idea come from?

Todd Howard: One of my main concerns starting the project was, 'How do we do an RPG with real-time gunplay that felt different?' One that didn't just reward the player's ability, but his character's ability. The basic design for VATS came together pretty fast amongst a few of us. During the course of the project it became more a question of how and when it was useful in the game, where it moved beyond a visual gimmick. But the visual pay-off of how the camera angles worked, and all the conditions it had to handle, proved to be a good bit of trial and error.



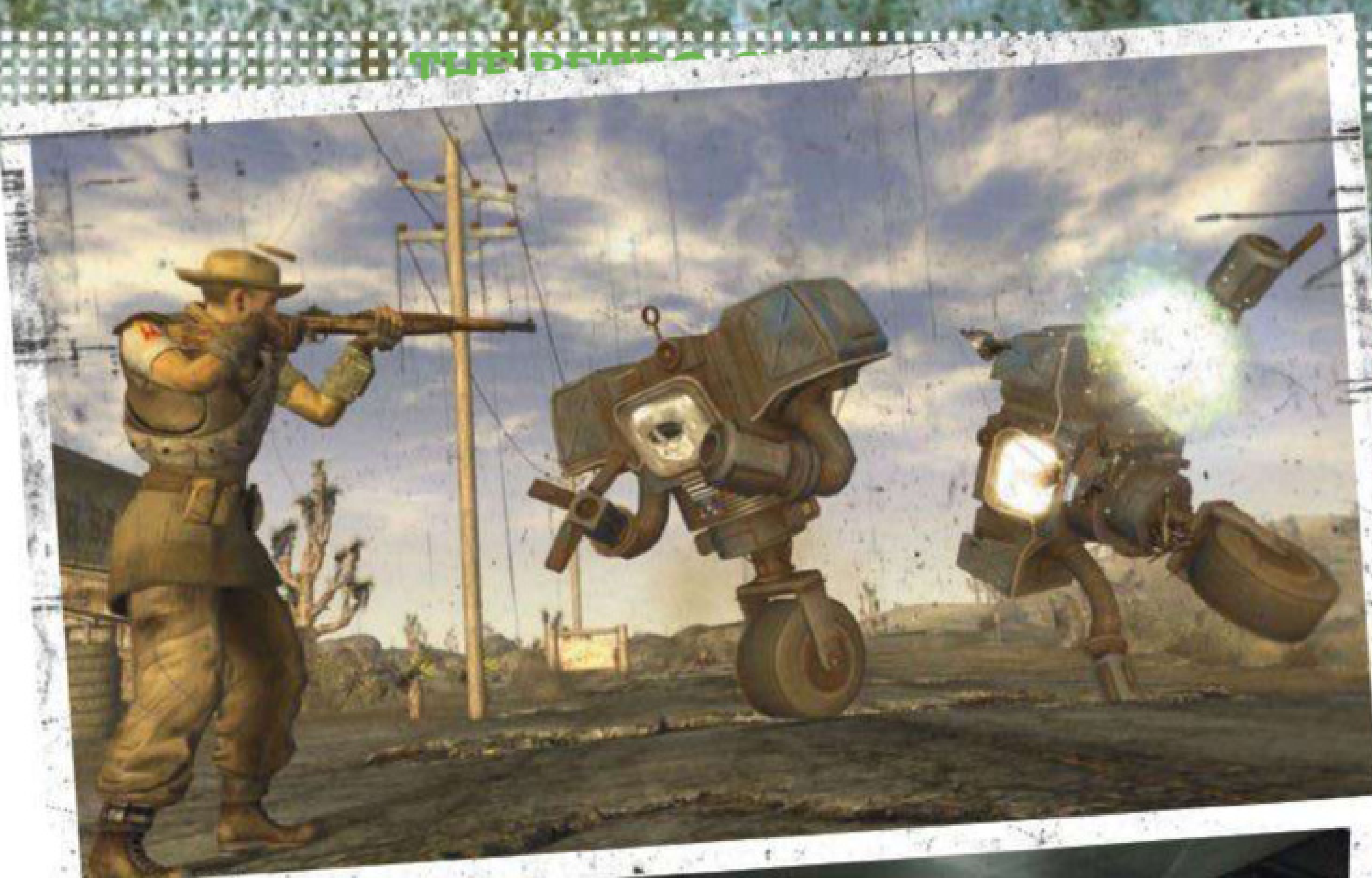
2010 – FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

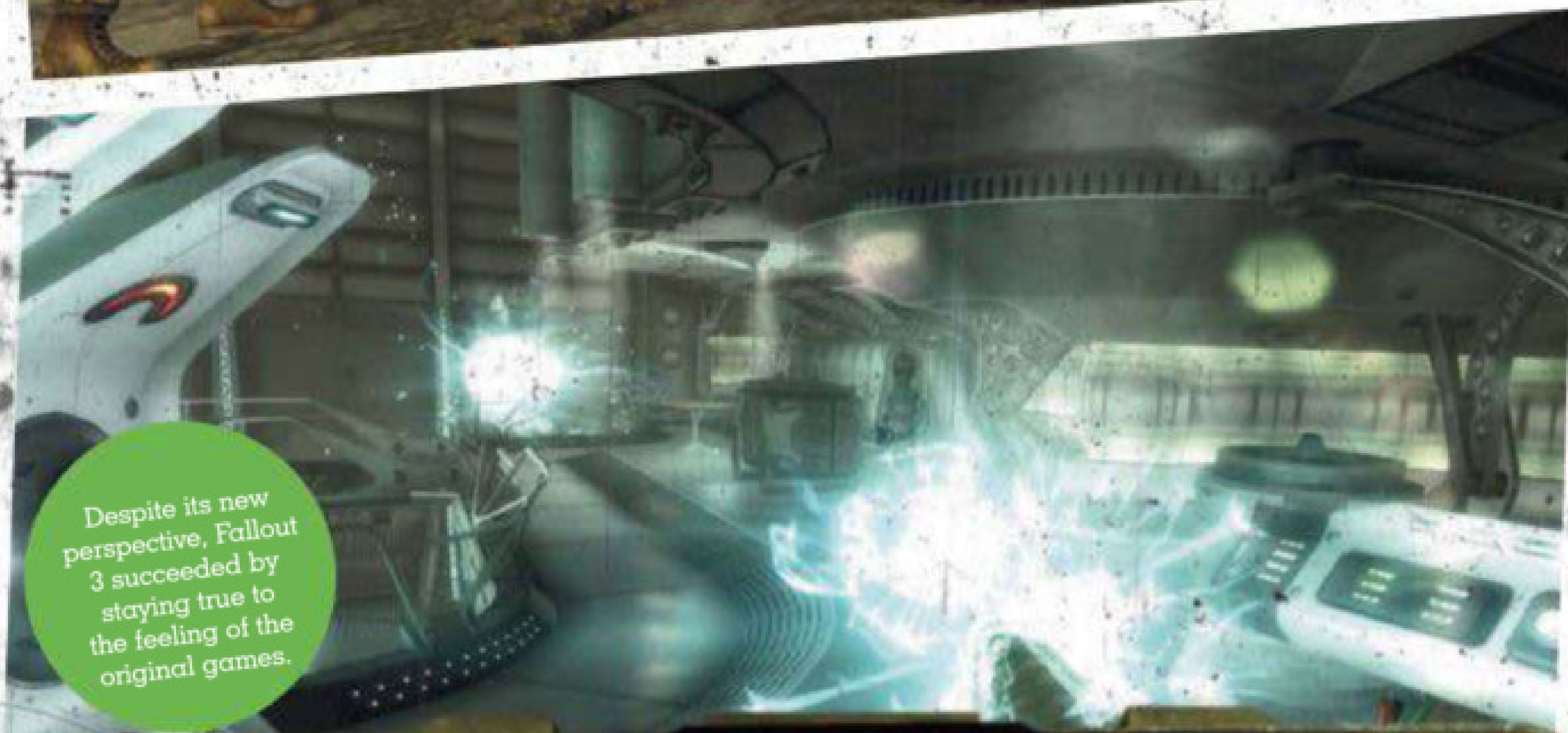
Many of the *Fallout: New Vegas* staff also worked on *Van Buren*, Interplay's unfinished *Fallout 3*. To what extent did you see *New Vegas* as an opportunity to realise some of your original ambitions for *Fallout 3*?

Chris Avellone: None for me – I came onto the title late. Still, a lot of plots and signposts from *Van Buren* reappeared in *New Vegas* with Caesar's Legion, the caravan wars, the mental instability caused by the Stealth Boys and more. At the same time, however, some areas evolved in new directions as a result of time. For example, the 'Big Empty/Big MT' in *Old World Blues* wasn't much like the original version in Van Buren, and the new direction was well received, regardless.

And what do you think you did on *New Vegas* that wouldn't have occurred to you or the team during the Black Isle years?

Chris Avellone: The idea of an open world you can walk across was a new element, and Arcanum was the first RPG that seemed to tackle that RPG element at Troika. I don't think replicating that or considering that is something Black Isle would have done. Everything else, however, would have fit within Black Isle's sensibilities: faction reputation, companions, town and quest structure, et cetera. It's possible we wouldn't have considered the same open story

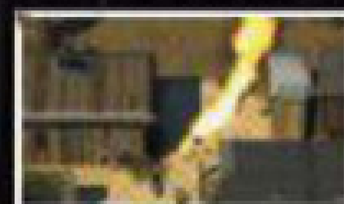




Despite its new perspective, Fallout 3 succeeded by staying true to the feeling of the original games.

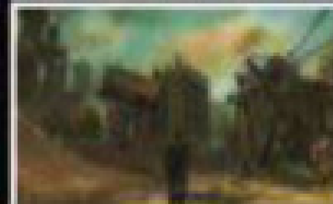
THE CANCELLED FALLOUTS

UNNAMED FALLOUT SHOOTER



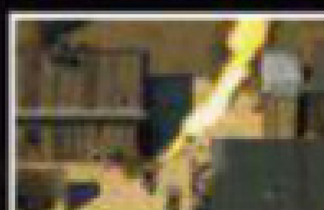
This top-down shooter, intended for PSone, was cancelled during pre-production. Little else is known about the project.

PROJECT V13



When Bethesda acquired the rights to *Fallout*, Interplay retained the rights to a *Fallout* MMO, at least for a few years, and developed such a game under the codename of *Project V13* during that time. You can read the full story of the development on page 76.

VAN BUREN



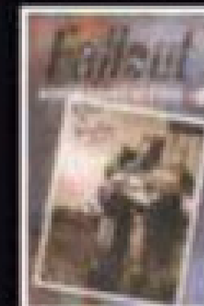
While the *Fallout 3* we know and love was made by Bethesda, there was another, developed by Black Isle but ultimately cancelled by Interplay. Chris Avellone gives us the sales pitch for a game that never was: "Through implementing another faux player character party that roams the wasteland and causes ripples with their actions just as your party does, we create a new level of antagonist-protagonist reactivity between two organic groups. Companions may leave, preferring the agenda of the other group; you may adventure down two different paths and not realise what's affecting the wasteland until much later; and utilising the game's principal theme of the Prisoner's Dilemma, we want you to discover that greater successes can be achieved, not by crushing your supposed adversaries, but learning the value of cooperation to achieve greater victories for you both."

FALLOUT EXTREME



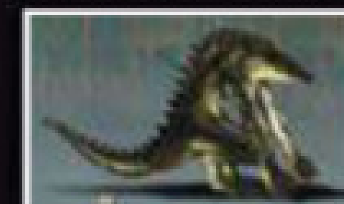
A squad-based shooter intended for Xbox and PS2, *Fallout Extreme* would have been very tactical in nature, much like Valve's Team Fortress, and actions taken in one misson would have had consequences for the next. If finished, *Fallout Extreme* would have given a rare glimpse into the post-nuclear world outside of the USA as events took the player through China, Russia and Mongolia.

FALLOUT: BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL 2



Started before the release of the first game and cancelled in 2004, this PS2 shooter looked to take in more similarities to the original *Fallout* with branching quest lines and a reputation system to create more choice and consequence. The plot also included leftover elements from both *Van Buren* and *Fallout Tactics 2*.

FALLOUT TACTICS 2



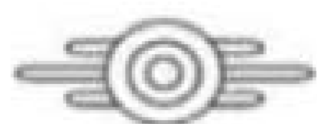
"We didn't get too far with *FT2* before the plug was pulled," says Ed Orman. "Multiplayer was going to be a focus from the outset, with single-player developed off the back of that. It would have been isometric but fully 3D.

"We wanted to use the sequel as an opportunity to examine what we'd done with *FT1* and address what we thought were its shortcomings. For example, one thing we got a bit trapped by was trying to emulate all of the RPG elements of the original within a tactical combat game: many of them were valid to keep, but some just didn't fit well and their presence hurt us, so the renewed focus on combat was a push to rectify that."

elements as *New Vegas*, which was much more freeform than most Black Isle titles.

What would you say modern tech has done for you, as an interactive writer, that helped make *New Vegas* what it is?
Chris Avellone: Mostly pissed me off. You can't write as many reactions because every line is more expensive when it needs to be said out loud. I could never have written all the reactive text and token text in *Fallout 2* if it had been *Fallout: New Vegas* – it's not technically possible to use the player's real name, nor is it financially worthwhile to record 100 lines per hooker where they address the player by their Mob Boss nickname for fun. Wouldn't happen, nope.

What about *Fallout: New Vegas* are you most proud of?
Chris Avellone: Technically, the fact we had a larger narrative arc and made four separate DLCs into one cohesive whole. Thanks to Bethesda, we were able to do this because we knew we'd be able to do four DLCs and could plan them out in this fashion. Aesthetically, I loved writing Dr. Mobius in *Old World Blues*. DLC is also a nice way to address concerns about the original game and expand the experience with new level caps, weapon balance, patches, and even new features that players may be hungering for: a new home base in *Old World Blues*, new implants, or even a place to dump all those coffee cups and pencils you find in the core game.



201X – FALLOUT 4?

What would you like to see from the series in the future?
Chris Avellone: Nathaniel Chapman, one of our designers, said *Fallout: New Orleans*, and that sounded pretty cool to me. If not that, San Francisco would be equally intriguing.

Feargus Urquhart: For Obsidian, it would be great to get an opportunity to make another *New Vegas*. There are always ideas we don't get to when we are making games and getting another crack at *Fallout* on our side of the United States would be great.

Tim Cain: I have made a design for a new *Fallout* game, in the spirit of *Fallout 1* and *2*, but I don't really talk about that design with anyone. That way, if I see those features show up in another game, I can think 'great minds think alike'.



THE AMERICAN WASTELAND

The where and when of the Fallout series

23 October 2077: Lasting just two hours, The Great War destroys almost all life above ground across the whole of North America. Only a privileged few living in secure, subterranean vaults are safe from the destruction and radiation above



THE HOOVER DAM
2253
Van Buren

■ The original *Fallout 3*, codenamed *Van Buren*, was set to take place across a large map, the bulk of which would have been taken up by Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. The story was to begin with the player escaping prison and would have many and varied endings depending on the player's actions through the game. For example, the Hoover Dam, later to be pivotal to the *New Vegas* plot, could be destroyed.



ARROYA
2241-2242
Fallout 2

■ 'The Chosen One', a descendent of The Vault Dweller, leaves a drought-stricken Arroyo, the tribal village founded by The Vault Dweller, in search of a GECK (Garden of Eden Creation Kit). Upon returning to Arroyo, The Chosen One discovers his tribe has been captured by The Enclave and to free them must find The Enclave base on an oil rig in the waters off San Francisco and destroy it.



SEATTLE
Unknown Date
Fallout Online

■ Interplay's ill-fated MMO would have included a post-apocalyptic Seattle as one of its locations.

ENCLAVE BASE

MILITARY BASE

DENVER

THE HUB

GRAND CANYON



LAS VEGAS
2281-2282
Fallout: New Vegas

■ The Hoover Dam has become the single most important choke point in the NCR-Legion War. The New Californian Republic has successfully defended the dam from Caesar's Legion attack once, but the Legion is planning a second, stronger push. Powerful robotics magnate, Mr. House controls the nearby city of New Vegas but realises that whoever wins the NCR-Legion War, will then look to wrest control of his city from him, so he sends for the Platinum Chip required to control his army of Securitron Robots, and ultimately it is The Courier, charged with delivering the chip, who decides the fate of The Hoover Dam and the Mojave Wasteland.



VAULT 13
2161-2162
Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game

■ The Vault Dweller is sent out from Vault 13, located about 200 miles southeast of San Francisco, to find a replacement water chip. After retrieving the chip, he defeats The Master and then goes on to destroy the Mariposa Military Base.

INVADED BY CHINA



VAULT ZERO
2197-2198
Fallout Tactics

The Midwestern Brotherhood Of Steel launches a campaign to find Vault Zero, the hub of the pre-War vault network, believed to house powerful technology. The campaign begins in the territory surrounding Chicago and pushes west across wastelands controlled by beast lords, mutants, Reavers and a powerful robot army originating from Vault Zero. The Brotherhood finds a nuclear warhead on the way and uses it to breach Vault Zero, which ultimately becomes a major new base of Brotherhood operations.



LOS YBANEZ
2208-2209
Fallout: Brotherhood Of Steel

A Brotherhood Of Steel Initiate is charged with finding several Brotherhood Paladins who have gone missing from the town of Carbon. The Initiate meets The Vault Dweller (now known as The Wasteland Stranger) who directs him to Los, the location of the mutant's Secret Bunker. There, the initiate finds and defeats Attis, the nefarious mutant general responsible for the disappearing Paladins.



WASHINGTON DC
2277-2278
Fallout 3

The Lone Wanderer leaves Vault 101, located in the Capital Wasteland northwest of Washington D.C., in search of his/her father, James. Upon finding him, the Wanderer helps him activate Project Purity, bringing clean water to the Capital Wasteland. James dies trying to prevent The Enclave from taking over Project Purity. The Lone Wanderer also helps The Brotherhood Of Steel activate its giant Liberty Prime robot, which almost single-handedly manages to recapture Project Purity from The Enclave.





FLORIDA
Unknown Date
Fallout Tactics 2

The cancelled *Fallout Tactics* sequel was intended to be set in the southeastern states of the US, including Florida, where an irradiated GECK gets used, resulting in a lush, mutated garden full of deadly mutant crocodiles.

BRAHMIN WOOD (CHICAGO)

PITTSBURGH

KANSAS CITY

POINT LOOKOUT



TEXAS
Unknown Date
Fallout: Brotherhood Of Steel 2

This cancelled sequel was to be set in East Texas, taking in locations including Austin, Fort Worth and San Antonio.



NEW ORLEANS
Unknown Date
Fallout 4, maybe

The next *Fallout* game hasn't yet been announced, but when we asked Obsidian's Chris Avellone where he thought the series might go next, he said, "Nathaniel Chapman, one of our designers, said *'Fallout: New Orleans'*, and that sounded pretty cool to me. If not that, San Francisco would be equally intriguing."

LOS

CARBON

FORT WORTH

AUSTIN

SAN ANTONIO



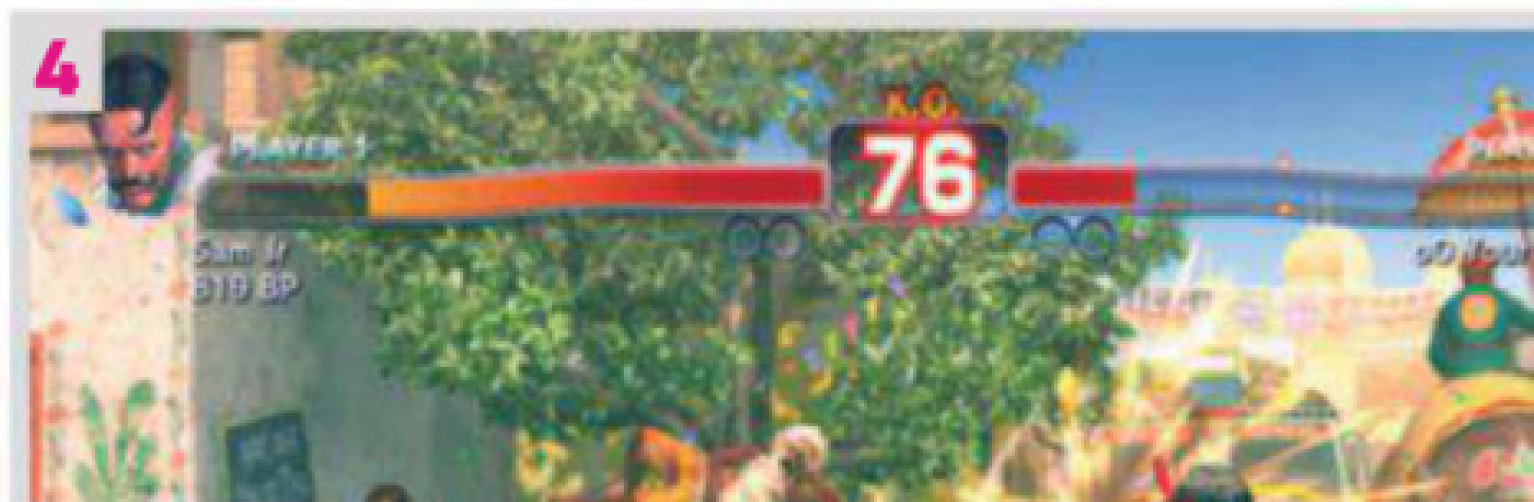
ANCHORAGE (ALASKA)
2077
Operation Anchorage

With Canada now completely under its control, the US military is able to mount an effective counter-attack against the invading Chinese forces, attaining victory on 10 January 2077. 100 years later, The Lone Wanderer participates in a virtual reality simulation of a key battle within the Anchorage Reclamation.

ESSENTIALS



It often seems that continual iteration is the lifeblood of the games industry, but there have been a few classic franchises that have seen disproportionate gaps between sequels – even decades. Whether it was because of the original developer's dissolution, the IP being shelved or simply because the developer took its own sweet time, this is a top ten list of games that fans yearned for over the years. Unlike most, however, these games actually satisfied the huge level of fan expectation or managed to meaningfully retain the spirit of the original franchise. These, quite simply, are the ten best franchise comebacks in gaming.


4


1


3


2


5

StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty
Developer: Blizzard
Franchise Gap: 1998-2010

1 There was a massive gap between *StarCraft* and *StarCraft II*, with fans forced to wait a gruelling twelve years before battling it out in Blizzard's long-awaited RTS sequel. Despite some serious changes to get used to, no LAN support and the need for a dedicated Battle.net account to play, RTS gamers found both its narrative framework and core mechanics polished to a gleaming finish. It's hardly surprising the emerging world of e-sports revolves around *StarCraft II*'s multiplayer; everything about its design is like the videogaming equivalent of a running shoe; sleek-edged, tight-fitting and totally moulded for purpose – but it's admittedly hard to relate to if you aren't a genre fan.

Kid Icarus: Uprising
Developer: Project Sora
Franchise Gap: 1991-2012

2 Nintendo has a habit of dipping into its deep well of iconic characters every few years and re-using them, but for almost twenty years the angelic Pit, the star of *Kid Icarus*, was the exception – much to the dismay of nostalgic fans. That all changed with the launch of the 3DS and Project Sora's *Kid Icarus: Uprising*. Not only did Project Sora effectively leverage the new 3D technology of the 3DS for its hybrid aerial and third-person shooter play, but its inclusion of collectable AR cards, dungeon crawler elements and a deep player progression system added serious layers of depth to *Uprising*'s offering.

Fallout 3
Developer: Bethesda
Franchise Gap: 1998-2008

3 There are usually serious fan misgivings when a classic gaming franchise ends up in the hands of a new developer, but they were surprisingly sanguine about Bethesda Game Studios taking over the *Fallout* franchise. The developer's seminal work on *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* hinted that it was the right choice to update the franchise, and this was more than proven with the release of *Fallout 3*. The shift from third-person to first-person adventuring, the introduction of VATS, and the creation of a huge, virtually seamless Wasteland wilderness to explore helped make *Fallout 3* a near-matchless RPG experience.

Street Fighter IV
Developer: Capcom
Franchise Gap: 1999-2008

4 Few returning franchise games have had quite the impact of *Street Fighter IV*. Yoshinori Ono's team at Capcom not only successfully updated *Street Fighter II*'s addictive formula to incorporate a 3D edge, but single-handedly resurrected the 2D fighting genre after nearly nine years in the wilderness. As *Street Fighter IV* brought the fighting game community back in from the cold, it introduced a whole new generation to 2D fighting. *Street Fighter IV* still defines the fighting game landscape, with developers using many of its core concepts as a base as they experiment with new ideas in the genre.

Diablo III
Developer: Blizzard
Franchise Gap: 2000-2012

5 Blizzard fans are no strangers to long waits; no other company has a more blatant 'it'll be done when it's done' policy. Epic dungeon crawler *Diablo III* was no exception, and it was only after a twelve-year hiatus that gamers returned to the hunt for the horrific *Diablo*. They were greeted, much to the chagrin of many, by Blizzard's take on DRM with the need for a constant online connection to Battle.net. But the game itself was an accessible and very modern take on *Diablo*'s classic mechanics, and the quality of the experience was arguably more than enough to make the angst worthwhile.

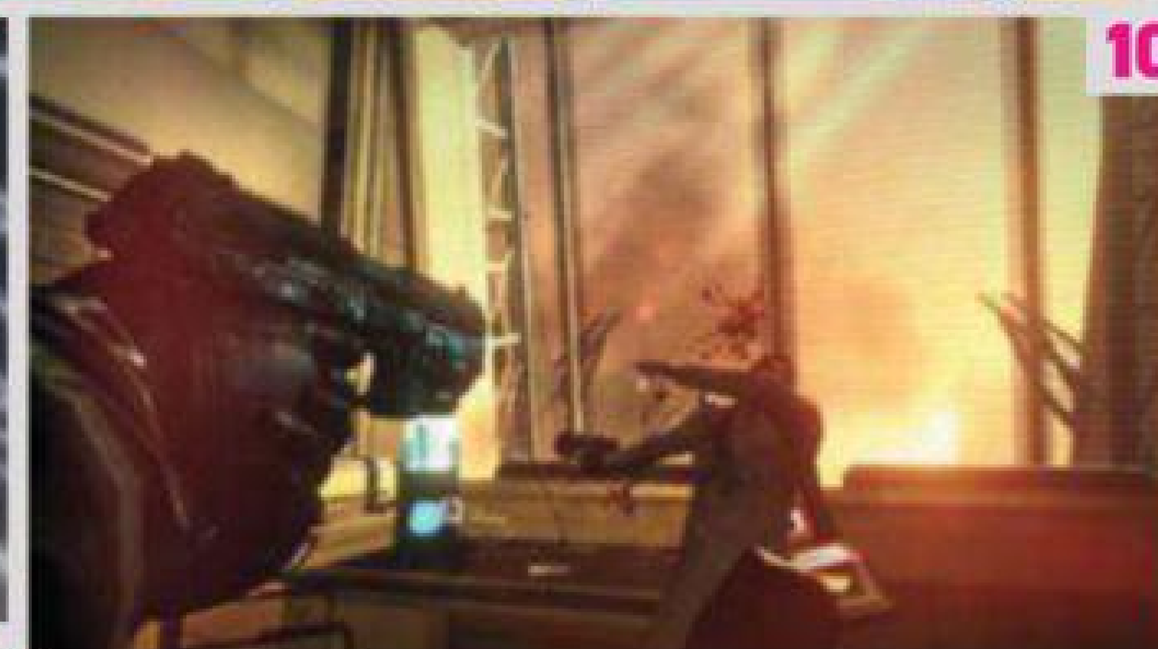














Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Franchise Gap: 2000-2011

6 The original *Deus Ex* could almost be considered videogame royalty, with PC gamers in particular holding Ion Storm's seminal action-RPG in especially high regard for its pioneering approach to player narrative and gameplay choice. It was never going to be easy to follow, but Eidos Montreal dived into *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* with gusto, creating a more modern take on the original concept that, despite flaws, still made player choice feel like the driving force of its gameplay.

Max Payne 3
Developer: Rockstar Games
Franchise Gap: 2003-2012

7 There was never much doubt that Rockstar was going to re-make *Max Payne* in its own image when it acquired the IP from Remedy Entertainment. When it finally released *Max Payne 3* this year the *GTA* developer did just that, creating a slickly produced revenge shooter that wrapped the core *Payne* mechanics in its trademark high production values. While *Max Payne 3* might have been missing some of the noir mystic of Remedy Entertainments entries into the series, it was enough of a hard-hitting, gritty shooter experience to please *Payne* fans, especially in its new multiplayer mode.

Donkey Kong Country Returns
Developer: Retro Studios
Franchise Gap: 1999-2010

8 With its experience resurrecting beloved Nintendo franchises already proven in the *Metroid Prime* trilogy, it was hardly surprising that Retro Studios was chosen to develop *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, but the Japanese developer outdid itself. Despite some arguably misplaced application of the Wii's motion controls, *Donkey Kong Country* is a challenging old-school platforming throwback. Thanks to Retro Studios' modern tweaks, it's arguably a far more satisfying experience than any of the original games, perfectly capturing the *Donkey Kong Country* spirit.

Marvel Vs. Capcom 3
Developer: Capcom
Franchise Gap: 2000-2012

9 *Marvel Vs. Capcom 3* could never have been made if the gaming climate hadn't been changed by *Street Fighter IV*'s success. With the re-introduction of the genre, and a growing fighter market, there was once again space for unusual takes on the fighting game, a situation that fitted Capcom's approach to *Marvel Vs. Capcom 3* to a tee. With its ridiculous, over-the-top looks balanced by a far more friendly approach to the hardcore mechanics under its zany hood, there was plenty there for both old and new *Marvel Vs. Capcom* fans to enjoy.

Syndicate
Developer: Starbreeze Studios
Franchise Gap: 1993- 2012

10 Bringing back a beloved franchise is never easy, but at least the developer undertaking it usually has at some support from fans. That wasn't the case with Starbreeze Studios' re-imagining of the *Syndicate* franchise. *Syndicate 2012* enraged the original PC games fanbase by totally changing its genre from RTS to FPS – seemingly because publisher EA simply didn't believe an RTS was a viable genre in 2012. Starbreeze did an admirable job with *Syndicate*'s cyberpunk premise, creating an engrossing linear shooter with some clever sandbox elements, but rather sadly it just failed to inspire gamers at large.

DREAMS DIE

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DAY OF RECKONING

>> **Following the collapse of 38 Studios, games™ examines the events that led to it and asks what lessons can be learnt**

Page 152

A Moment With… Tara Strong

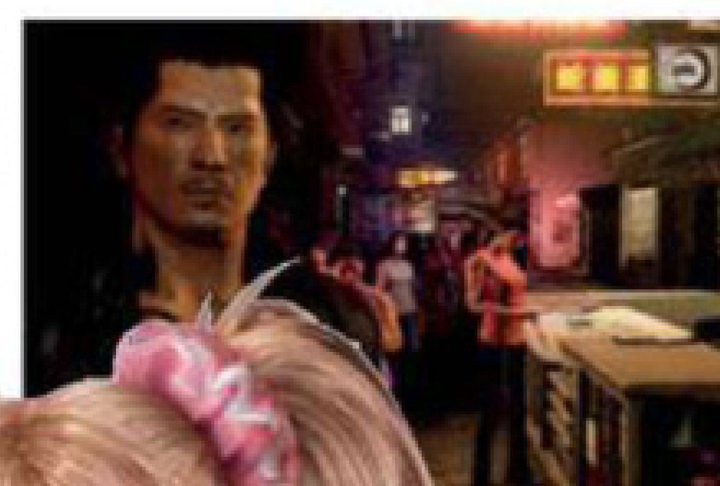
>> The voice actress behind *Arkham City*'s Harley Quinn in reflects on videogame voice work



Page 154

A Moment With… GameFly

>> GameFly co-founder Sean Spector discusses the distribution service's arrival in the UK





THE DEATH OF 38 STUDIOS

With the sudden shuttering of Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning developer 38 Studios, ***games™*** *examines the collapse and asks what lessons it might hold for the industry*



THE CLOSURE OF 38 Studios in May may not have just spelled the end for the ailing developer and both MMO *Project Copernicus* and *Kingdoms Of Amalur*. It may well also mark the point at which the industry could be forced to accept hard truths about the economic models developers use, and become wary of the potential cost of public investment in the form of incentives like tax breaks and credits.

The US developer's financial woes were revealed when it was unable to make its first scheduled repayment to the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation of $1.125 million on the 14 May – its initial commitment on a $75 million loan the studio had specifically secured to develop the then-secret MMO based upon the *Kingdoms Of Amalur* IP and codenamed *Project Copernicus*.


Dr Richard Wilson

But three months after *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning*'s launch in February, and despite studio founder Curt Shilling's assertion it had "outperformed EA's expectations", there were serious difficulties. After 38 Studios' failure to meet its repayment the State of Rhode Island held emergency talks with the developer. When the studio eventually made a payment on 18 May, Rhode Island State Governor Lincoln Chafee held a press conference revealing the developer had been working on MMO *Project Copernicus* for a planned release of June 2013. He declared the state would no longer be investing public funds in 38 Studios, saying, "There's no more easy money," and urging the troubled studio to find private investors.

None materialised, however, and by 24 May, 38 Studios, which hadn't paid its staff since the end of April, laid off its entire workforce. With the studio closure all of its assets, including *Project Copernicus*, became the property of the State of Rhode Island. Governor Chafee claimed that 38 Studios' dire financial trouble came about in part because *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning* failed to live up to expectations. "The game failed," Chafee said, claiming that according to experts he had consulted, it needed to sell more than 3 million copies just to break even, and it unfortunately came nowhere close to that goal.

In the wake of the studio closure, Curt Schilling was unequivocal in his belief that Chafee had irrevocably damaged 38 Studios with his "devastating" public remarks about its financial health, claiming they'd scared off private investors that could have rescued the company and that he himself could personally lose up to $50 million in the collapse.

In many ways, 38 Studios' demise explains a growing shift within the industry away from focusing on large single game development. Its plans to release *Kingdoms Of Amalur* and then try

THE COLLAPSE OF A KINGDOM

38 STUDIOS' DEMISE TOOK PLACE OVER A SHOCKINGLY BRIEF PERIOD OF TIME, DRIVEN BY SUDDEN FINANCIAL COLLAPSE AND SOME HARD POLITICAL DECISIONS

7 FEBRUARY 2012:
***Kingdoms Of Amalur* is released to mixed reviews. It goes on to sell 1.22 million copies in 90 days.**

14 MAY 2012:
It's first reported 38 Studios is having problems repaying debt to the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC).

16 MAY 2012:
The RIEDC holds a closed-door emergency meeting with 38 Studios. RIEDC Director Keith Stokes, who brokered the deal between RIEDC and 38 Studios, is fired.

17 MAY 2012:
38 Studios' first check to the RIEDC bounces, and it misses payroll to employees.

18 MAY 2012:
38 Studios manages to make a $1.1 Million payment.

18 MAY 2012:
Governor Lincoln Chaffee announces *Project Copernicus* was due in 2013 in a press conference, but declares no more public money will be invested.

23 MAY 2012:
CEO Jennifer Maclean and senior vice president of product development John Blakely update their LinkedIn profiles to show they have left the company.

24 MAY 2012:
38 STUDIOS LAYS OFF ALL EMPLOYEES; THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND CLAIMS ALL ASSETS.

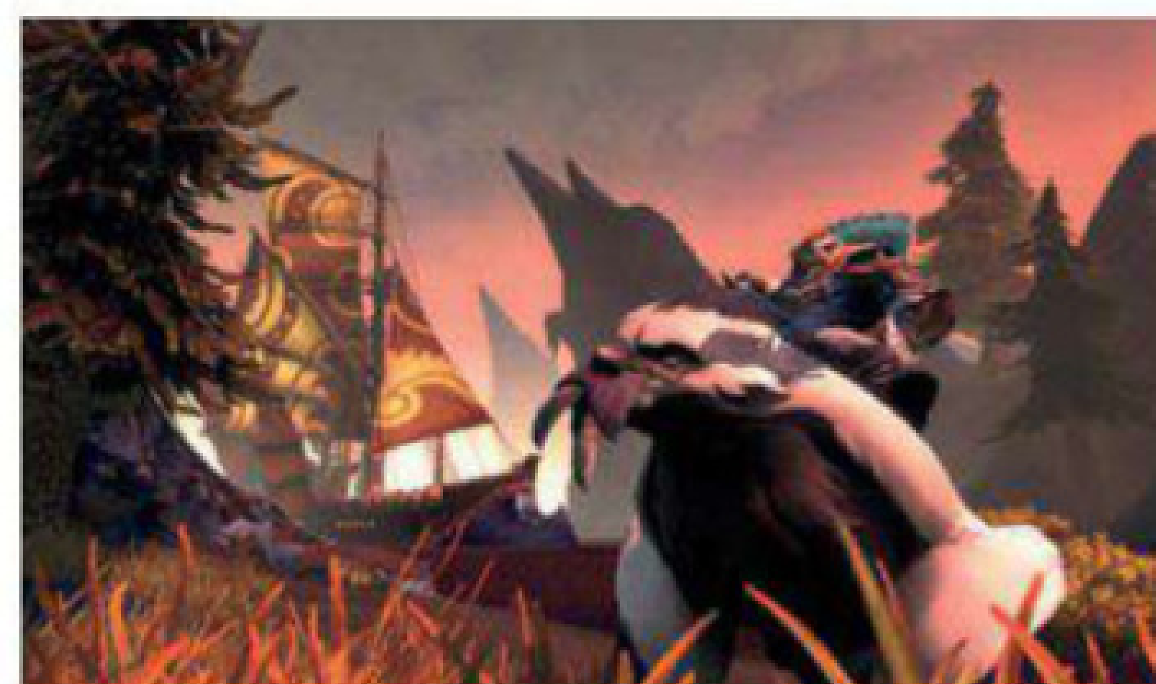
to sell an MMO based on the IP was arguably a gamble – and one that unfortunately failed. "I think once again it confirms the fact that it's good to have more than one arrow in your bow in games development," explains Dr Richard Wilson, head of TIGA, the trade association representing the UK's games industry. "Because as far as I can tell, they were mostly just working on one highly expensive game at a time, and had a large staff head-count to do that."

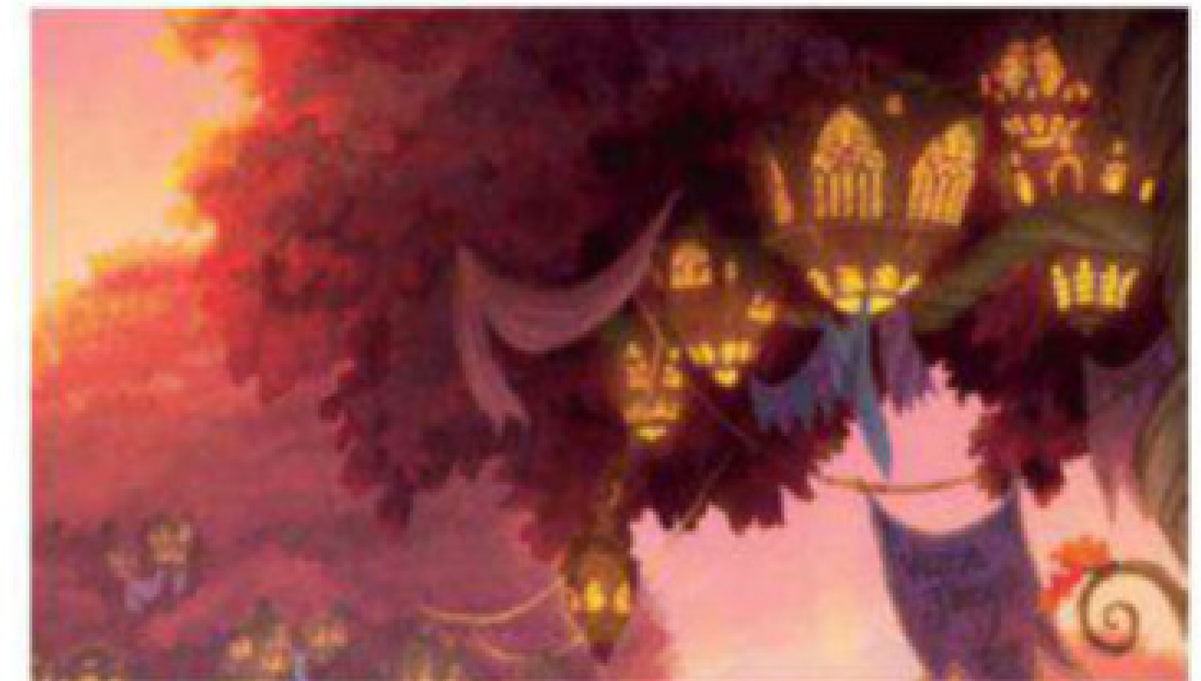
In that situation, there's a danger if that project fails or a backer withdraws support as the RIEDC did. "It must make sense where possible to experiment as much as possible with a number of different games at one time and back the one with the greatest commercial opportunity," says Wilson. "And that's what many smaller developers are doing; making games for mobile and tablet devices, and working to a new business model of games and service where they release a certain amount of a playable game, then of course build it up in response to consumer metrics, which seems to be a good way to proceed."

Even if 38 Studios hadn't folded there was no guarantee that *Project Copernicus* would have succeeded. "Nobody is buying MMOs after *Star Wars* fizzled. I think its value is low, probably $20 million or so," analyst Michael Pachter told Joystiq. It's an assessment that chimes with Wilson. "I think games development is very competitive, and that's especially true in the MMO space. You really have to stand out, and it's hard to stand out in that particular marketplace."

> "Development is competitive, and that's especially true in the MMO space. You have to stand out"
> Dr Richard Wilson, TIGA

As it stands, the State of Rhode Island could be lumbered with a difficult-to-shift IP. Some argue it should have tried to keep 38 Studios solvent and prevented the final layoff, which might have left it able to recoup taxpayers' losses by selling the developer and its assets to a publisher as a going concern. "It's a very tough one really," says Wilson. "The ideal thing would be for them to bring in another partner to take over the studio and try to salvage as many of the lost jobs as possible." As it stands, the potential bad debt incurred by 38 Studios' failure is already causing finger pointing in Washington. With the increasing role of public finance in games development worldwide, there's the danger of investment becoming politicised by accountability issues


38 Studios had been hoping that a publisher like EA would pick up *Project Copernicus*.


The industry is increasingly questioning investing in large-scale single game development, which can sink a studio.

over taxpayers' money and political points scoring, which may have been a factor in Rhode Island. Here in the UK, industry bodies like TIGA campaigned "aggressively and tenaciously" for a tax credits support system that mirrors the support granted to the UK film industry. Their efforts were rewarded in the last budget, when Chancellor George Osborne announced games industry tax breaks would go into effect in April 2013.

Thankfully, political jockeying isn't something British developers will have to worry about. "In the case of the UK we don't have a Federal system, despite having devolved Parliaments, in the way they do in the States," explains Dr Wilson. There were previously, he says, development agencies that competed for inward investment, but the scale was nothing like that of the US. In the UK, impartial civil servants will award tax credits, but Wilson stresses that developers and investors need to be realistic about the impact of tax breaks. They aren't a guarantee of success, despite their advantages. "I'd like to think most investors are aware of that anyway, because when you launch games you can't be sure every one will be a blockbuster." With that said, however, government support is still crucial to the industry. "Once the tax credit here comes into operation, you'll see a range of benefits for developers, some who will be successful and some who won't, but it'll even itself out. The positive thing about the tax break we've campaigned for is that research shows it'll increase investment overall."

In many ways, 38 Studios' collapse is reminiscent of Realtime Worlds' failure, which lost millions in UK government investment on a similar gamble creating *APB* in 2011. While a critical and commercial failure, the IP was later sold to K2 Network and re-launched as a moderately successful free-to-play game. The same could eventually end up being true of *Project Copernicus*.

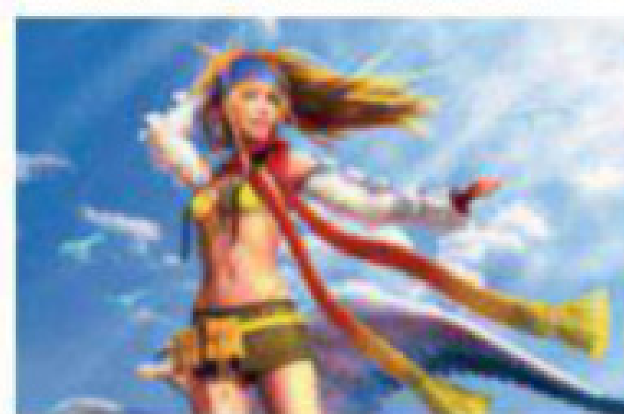
But despite that optimistic possibility, the overall moral of the story must be clear. The days of running after 'the big MMO dream' are surely over. It might not be quite as emotive as the 38 Studios vision of a sprawling new franchise, but prudent planning on multiple fronts rather than grandiose dreams could be the best way to survive in the current economic climate. 

A MOMENT WITH... TARA STRONG

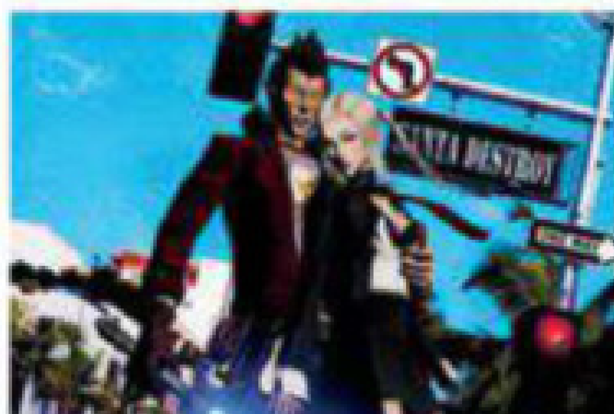
FAMOUS ROLES

- Juliet – Lollipop Chainsaw
- Harley Quinn – Batman: Arkham Asylum
- Rikku – Final Fantasy X
- Sheegor – Psychonauts

GAME HIGHLIGHTS



>> Final Fantasy X
[2001]



>> No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle
[2009]

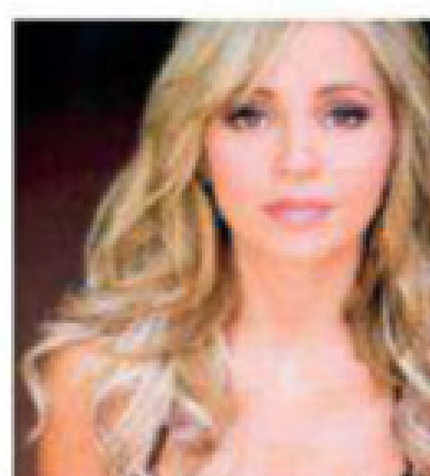


>> Batman: Arkham City
[2011]



>> Lollipop Chainsaw
[2012]

>> Tara Strong has been a prolific voice actress since 1987, working in TV, cinema and videogames. Her videogame work has seen her play a diverse collection of roles, most recently voicing Harley Quinn in RockSteady Studios' Batman: Arkham City and its companion DLC, Harley Quinn's Revenge



TARA STRONG
ACTRESS

You've done a great deal of voice work in the industry; how does it stack up against working with Rocksteady Studios on *Batman: Arkham City*?

I sometimes get stressed out working on games – which can have thousands of lines of script – and worry, 'Am I going to be able to maintain my energy?' I know the fans are going to feel like they're in the game with me, so I don't want to disappoint them. But the second I met the team at Rocksteady I was blown away by their dedication to the *Batman* legacy and my character. The writing on *Arkham City* is brilliant; it's so dark and they've really done their homework. I really felt like every time I went into the studio it wasn't like, 'Oh gosh, how am I going to get through this?' It was more, 'Oh gosh, this is exciting!' I definitely bounced off their passion.



You came onto *Arkham City* and took over as Harley Quinn, who had previously been voiced by Arleen Sorkin. How did you approach developing the character for yourself?

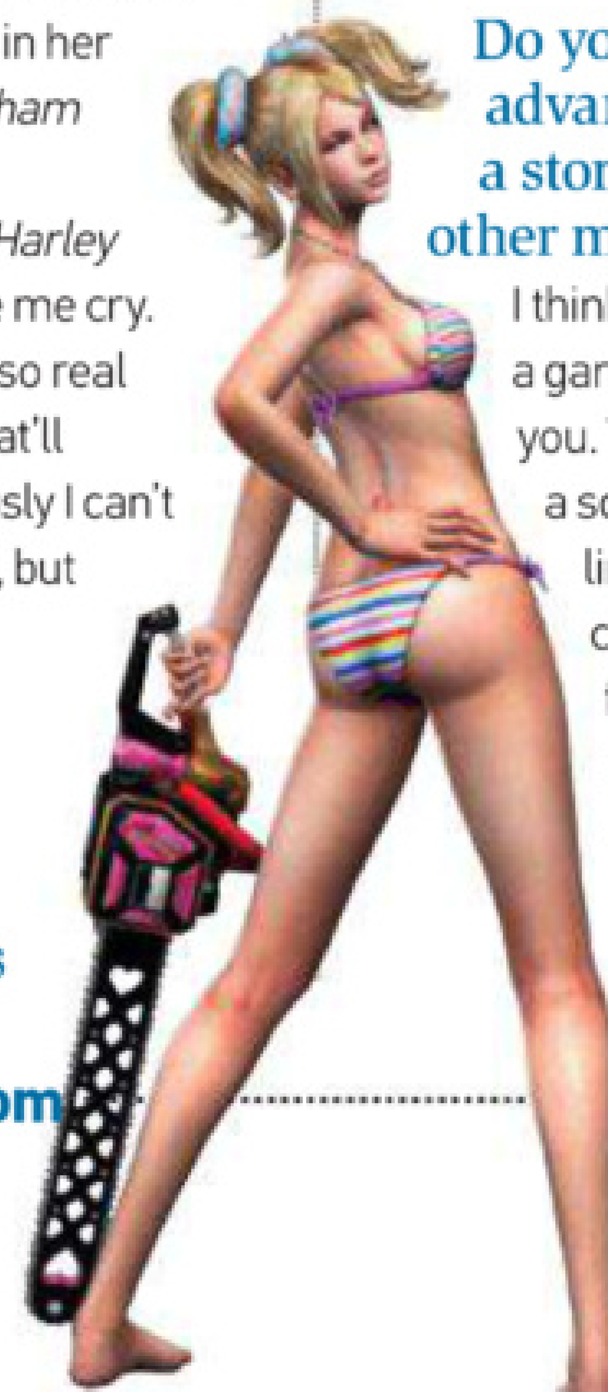
It was really challenging because I've worked alongside Arleen and was always really enamoured of her performance. It was really intimidating to step into those shoes, so I'm grateful the fans have been so supportive. I love how the *Batman* stuff is very real and approached Harley that way. She's obviously crazy and has a dark side, but also a very loving side in her relationship to Joker. After *Arkham City* I can say she's not a happy camper! Some of the things in *Harley Quinn's Revenge* actually made me cry. Her struggles and her pain are so real I felt that with her, and I think that'll translate into the game. Obviously I can't give away a whole lot of details, but it's really fantastic.

The games industry is changing, with an increasing number of Hollywood scriptwriters writing for games. Do you feel there's a real benefit to this?

When people ask me what's changed, my first answer is the industry itself. When it started out, developers said, 'Let's just throw it together and hire people in-house to direct and use non-union actors to voice it.' But now videogames are the new medium for entertainment and developers are hiring professional actors, writers and directors, and that's reflected in the level of quality in the games. As a performer that makes me incredibly happy.

Is there a difference between working with Western and Japanese game developers?

I think working with Japanese developers is a little more challenging because they're translating and Japanese culture is different. How they approach social situations and sexuality is different, and it's hard making that work in America. From an acting perspective, it's occasionally frustrating wanting to do something a little different from how my character's mouth has been animated if I don't voice first, which limits how creative I can be.



Do you think there are advantages to videogames as a storytelling medium that other media don't have?

I think that people feel like they're in a game with you, and like they know you. That's why even when there's a script with say, eight thousand lines, you stay true to your character to make sure they don't feel disappointed. I get a lot of feedback on places like Twitter about how much gamers enjoy my performances, and it's so rewarding.

Visit the website at www.tarastrong.com

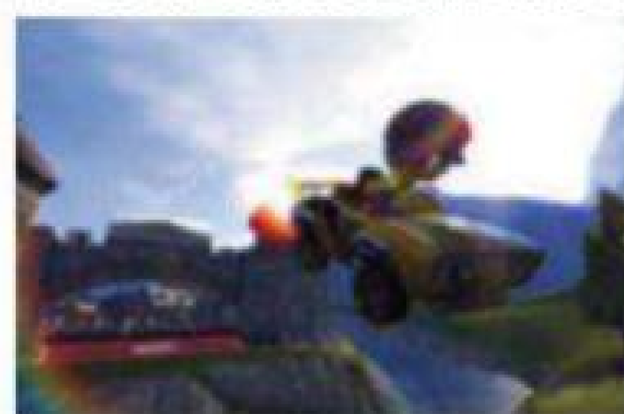
A MOMENT WITH...

UNITED FRONT GAMES

KEY FIGUREHEADS

- Clint Hanson, CG supervisor/co-founder
- Colin O'Connor, software engineer
- Rob Oliveira, art director/co-founder

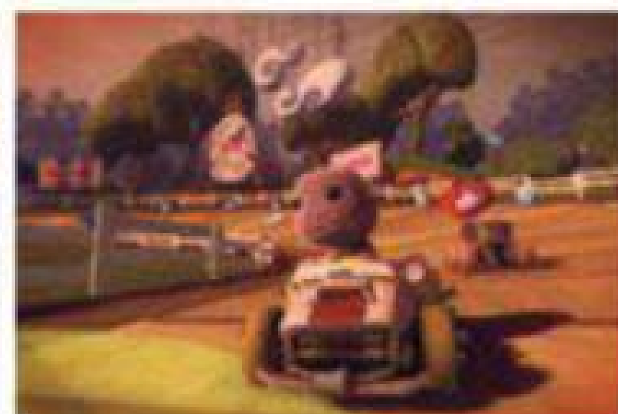
DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS



>> ModNation Racers [2010]



>> Sleeping Dogs [2012]



>> LittleBigPlanet Karting [2012]

>> United Front Games made an impressive debut with PlayStation 3-exclusive karting game ModNation Racers. Now working with Square Enix on Sleeping Dogs, senior producer Jeff O'Connell discusses the game's turbulent production, the True Crime licence and John Woo's gun-fu



JEFF O'CONNELL
SENIOR PRODUCER

What challenges did you face when recreating such a distinctive city?

>> Just look at the fact that no other games have been set in Hong Kong – not recently, at least. It's an incredible playground for us to bring something new to people. I think we picked an amazing city to replicate. Hong Kong has an incredible history of martial arts, which for us was a way to really anchor the game. What we are really trying to do is create mechanics that you haven't seen in open-world games before. We have an incredible emphasis on melee combat; you've got John Woo and his gun-fu that we've tapped into a bit and we've gone a little bit Hollywood with some of our driving and shooting segments. From a standpoint of having an incredible history of action, Hong Kong is amazing.



Speaking of action, you've stressed the incredible emphasis on manifold complex gameplay mechanics – how do you balance all of those elements successfully?

>> It really comes down to discipline through production to try and deliver on both experiences. Many open-world games over the past few years have come out, and you typically see them attempt one aspect of gameplay or the other. You see a focus on the mechanics, usually at the expense of the open world – or you see the opposite. What we have tried to do is deliver amazing mechanics and a great sandbox, and that really comes down to a very experienced team that has probably been the backbone of delivering on both of those points. We've got guys from *Need For Speed*, guys from *Bully* and we've got guys from the *Godfather* franchise – a huge variety of different games. I think getting those people together and knowing how to pull things off has really meant the world.

The limbo period between Activision canning the project (while it was still *True Crime*) and Square Enix acquiring it must have been difficult for the studio. What were you doing in the interim?

>> I've been on the game since the very first day United Front opened its doors. Obviously, it was a very difficult time for us when that happened. But at the same time, we always knew that the game was something special; we always had confidence in the game. I also think that the circumstances surrounding the cancellation were more to do with the market than the game itself. To then have the Square Enix London team come and check it out and say, 'Let's do this' – it really brought us back to what we wanted to do and create an original IP. It was a huge confidence boost. I mean, how can we get cancelled and not take it personally?

Did dispensing with the *True Crime* licence liberate the team creatively?

>> Absolutely... I like that world, 'liberate'. When we started developing the title we always wanted it to be an original IP, but for various different reasons Activision attached the *True Crime* licence to it. But we had never really thought of it in that respect. The biggest similarity, of course, was that you're a cop, but beyond that we looked to innovate in terms of the setting. We wanted to innovate in terms of depth of mechanics and the seriousness of the story. For us, it was an opportunity to get back to basics and do what we wanted to do.

Was it necessary to include scenes of ultra-violence? Was there a sense that you needed to punctuate the grit of the narrative?

>> I think so. Wei Shen is an undercover cop fighting for his life, and he has to maintain his standing and his cover in one of the most renowned, violent gang cultures in the world. To pull our punches there I don't think would have served the overall tone of the game and story. To make a less-than-authentic version of the story of triad life – where people are regularly hacked with cleavers and left for dead on the steps of hotels – would've at this point been a disservice. I think gamers expect something mature.

Visit the website at www.unitedfrontgames.com

games™ MMO WORLDS

The essential guide to the online gaming universe

STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

games™ talks to the developer of the popular hack-and-slash MMO about the open beta's phenomenal success.

160 PREVIEWED
FAMILY GUY ONLINE
Is this free-to-play cartoon spin-off a cheap cash-grab or an MMO worth playing?

161 INTERVIEWED
DRAKENSANG ONLINE
games™ talks to the developer of the popular hack-and-slash MMO about the open beta's success


Can *The Old Republic* work as a free-to-play MMO? BioWare is curently considering a change in subscription model

The Old Republic: Six Months On

DROPPING SUBSCRIPTION NUMBERS. STAFF LAYOFFS. HOW WILL BIOWARE TURN THE FORTUNES OF STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC IN THE COMING MONTHS?

There hasn't been a gaming venture in recent memory more overtly ambitious than *The Old Republic*. Everyone knew that the *Star Wars* licence would be a double-edged sword for BioWare – a familiar universe thriving and diverse enough to support the type of exploration-heavy experience expected, while also a marketable alternative to a genre predominantly led by swords-and-sorcery staples. But with BioWare at the helm, it was also burdened by expectation.

Having previously explored the mythology of George Lucas' sci-fi franchise in *Knights Of The Old Republic*, the MMO was expected to integrate a similarly dynamic narrative arc as its predecessor. With all this – and not to mention the waning popularity of pre-existing *Star Wars* MMO, *Star Wars: Galaxies* – BioWare had a duty to deliver a product as ubiquitous as the licence's heritage.

Netting one million subscriptions within three days of its launch seemed to indicate that the gamble had paid off, with casual and hardcore fans alike flocking to the servers to get a taste of a galaxy far, far away. Yet the precarious balance of genre tropes and narrative depth proved too laborious to secure longevity with a significant portion of early early would-be Jedi Masters.

BioWare has lost in excess of 400,000 subscriptions since February, but the studio suggests that this drop-off is just a typical by-product of the contemporary MMO and audience tastes.

"We have subscription numbers a lot of people would kill for, but we have to keep things in perspective," says *The Old Republic*'s lead designer, Emmanuel Lusinchi. "It's never fun to see subscription numbers go down, but then again how did you count? Did you count every box sold instead of every person who subscribed after the three months? These are important questions, and if you do the math properly maybe you should be very careful when talking about subscriber numbers."

This doesn't mean that BioWare has outright ignored the censure. The developer has been nothing but receptive to criticism, and reactive in how it plans to secure a stable future as *The Old Republic* heads into its difficult embedding period. April saw the crucial release of Legacy patch 1.2, with a swathe of changes, including the ability to link alt characters (ostensibly creating a family tree, enabling abilities to be shared), alongside new dungeon areas. But nothing quite captured the community's imagination like the secret Rakghoul Plague event hidden on the familiar sandy dunes of Tatooine.

If the Legacy patch was indicative of BioWare's future intentions with the MMO then it'll come as welcome reassurance to veteran space explorers. For BioWare, the inclusion of a surprise event and new features that enable players to further customise their experience was a step to affirm the studio's dedication and continued support for the product.

"We have to be aware that subscription is a tough sell, right?" asks Lusinchi. "We have to get people to make a month-to-month commitment. $15 a month maybe wasn't a lot five or six years ago but people's money goes a lot further now; you can buy probably ten iPhone games for that price."

It could be argued that *The Old Republic* bowed into the MMO marketplace two years too late. With the advent of the free-to-play subscription model becoming the dominant template for emerging MMO brands, it would

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: BioWare
ORIGIN: US



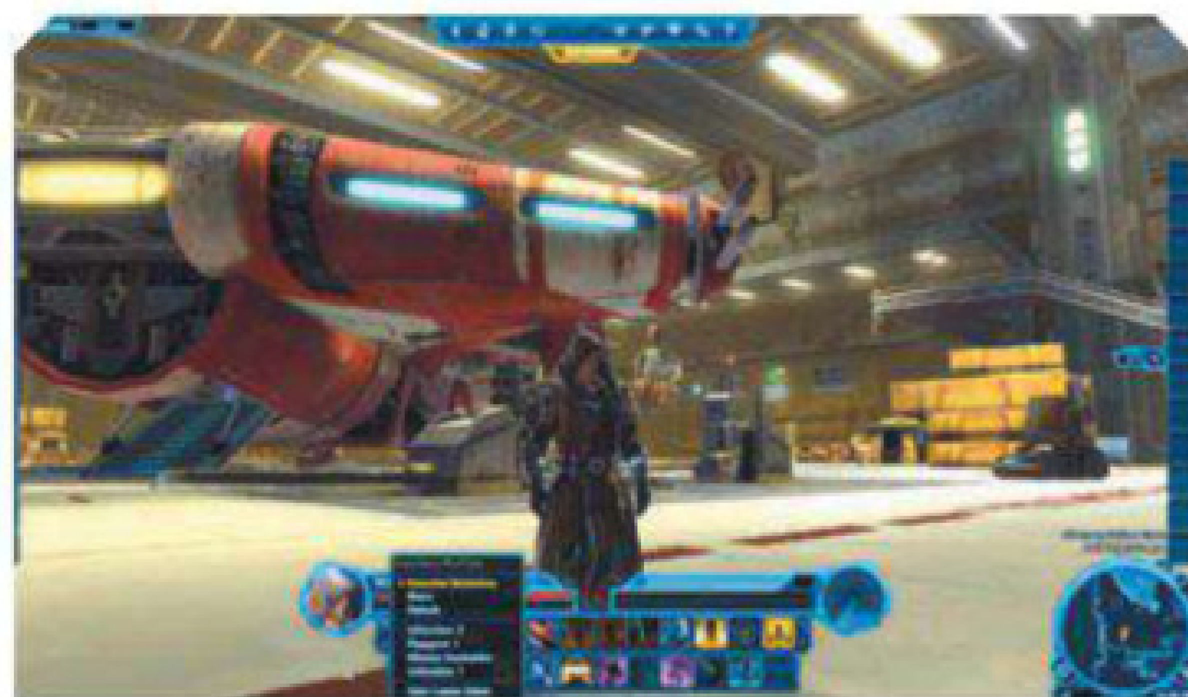


The Rakghoul Plague event surprised and elated the game's veteran players. No doubt BioWare will be adding more features along these lines.

The Allies update enables players to jump servers and join other friends on *The Old Republic*.

"We have subscription numbers a lot of people would kill for, but we have to keep things in perspective"





Update 1.3's group-finder addition enables players to quickly find the right class allies before embarking on a quest. Players will also be able to further customise their avatar's look.



be myopic of BioWare to overlook the shifts in player expectations.

"I THINK IT'S more than the free-to-play model – there are a lot of competitive offers," suggests Lusinchi. "If it was just free-to-play games and they weren't very good it wouldn't even be a question, but there are definitely good games out there, so of course all of this competition impacts your plan."

Still, the advantages of free-to-play haven't gone unnoticed by the developer. Asked whether it would be feasible to adapt *The Old Republic* to a free-to-play model, Lusinchi confirms that the developer has investigated alternative subscription models.

"The MMO market is very dynamic and we need to be dynamic as well," he says. "We are looking at everything but I can't tell you in much detail. This decision is a little bit above my pay grade. We have to be flexible and adapt to what is going on."

Indeed, after E3, we know that *The Old Republic* will support free-to-play up to level 15, but whether this represents the full extent of BioWare's subscription changes or stands as a trial for a larger restructuring remains to be seen. Still, at the forefront of *The Old Republic*'s second wind is a qualitative force, with Allies patch 1.3 focusing on several key gameplay refinements – such as group search, server-to-server character transfers and Legacy perks that enable levelling customisation – geared to the tastes of a diverse user-base. But if *The Old Republic* can continue to support its community with meaningful updates, then BioWare may be vindicated in its choice of subscription model. It's a bold standing, but you'd expect nothing less from an online galaxy built on such unfettered ambition. 

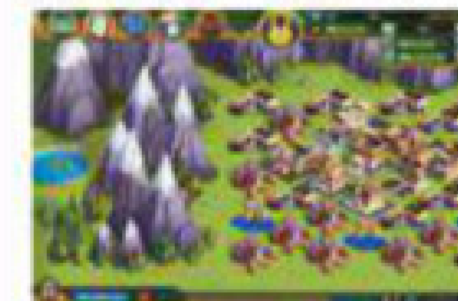
PATCH 3 STANDING BY

BioWare will shortly release the latest update for *The Old Republic*, with Allies (patch 1.3) building off the successful modifications that made the Legacy (1.2) update back in April such a roaring success. Primarily, it will enable users to customise the way they upgrade characters – for example: selecting to gain more experience points through space combat, rather than PvP. It will also introduce a group search tool, which the community has been demanding for since launch. As well as other tweaks, expect a few surprises tucked away after the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the secret Rakghoul Plague event hidden in the Legacy update.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

JAGEX SHUTS DOWN 8REALMS, SOME JOB LOSSES REPORTED



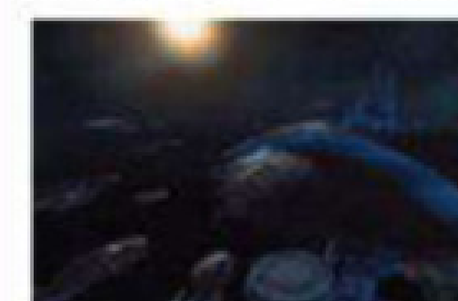
After only managing to attract ten per cent of users needed to turn a profit, Jagex has closed MMO *8Realms* only a year after it launched the game's closed beta. As a result of the closure, a number of Jagex staff members will lose their jobs.

FIRST FOOTAGE OF MARVEL HEROES MMO UNVEILED



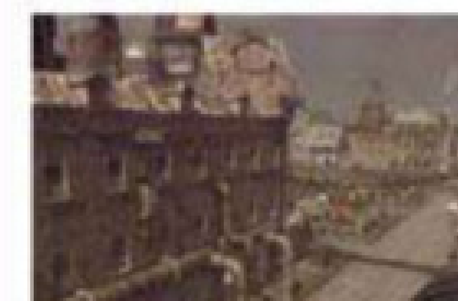
For once Marvel is playing catch-up with DC with its gaggle of masked crimefighters, unveiling the first footage for upcoming MMO *Marvel Heroes*. The game will see online players fighting alongside the familiar likes of Spider-Man, Iron Man and Hulk, while battling Dr. Doom's nefarious schemes.

BIG STAR TREK ONLINE UPDATE IMMINENT



In the first significant patch in over a year, *Star Trek Online* players can expect the release of a fleet advancement system, two new five-person missions and an update to The Foundry (the tools for creating user-generated content) as part of the announced *Season Six* update. A release date for the patch has yet to be confirmed.

FIRST FOOTAGE OF BLACK GOLD ONLINE SURFACES



It's been over a year since Snail Games last discussed steampunk MMO *Black Gold Online*, but the debut English trailer has found its way online. Not much is known about the hotly anticipated free-to-play MMO, but it involves two factions representing nature and technology, battling over a powerful, magical resource known as Black Gold.





Some quests have a neat spin on convention, such as chasing a greased-up deaf guy across Quahog. The missions tie into the idiosyncratic humour of the television series as much as you might hope them to.





The hotkey combat system falls a little flat, with a lack of abilities and some lumbering implementation.



Familiar characters can be found doling out quests in multiple locations at one time. The voice work of the cast is exceptional but you'll often hear the same quips recycled.

Family Guy Online

LUCKY THERE'S A FAMILY GUY LICENCE

We're at the dawn of a new era of MMO – and no, this isn't necessarily a good thing. At some point over the last couple of years, developers and marketing departments alike have stuck upon an equal opportunity to capitalise on a burgeoning property for a fat wad of cash. So here we are faced with browser-based *Family Guy Online* – the open beta of which is currently available.

Players are first given the option to pick a Griffin family template from which to base their avatar. You'll find servers predominantly populated with rugby ball-headed babies and dumpy fellas, but droll canines are a rare occurrence – the Brian template comes at an extra cost.



INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: 20th Century Fox
DEVELOPER: Roadhouse Interactive/ ACRONYM Games
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2012
PRICE: Free



Developer Roadhouse Interactive has nailed the visuals wholeheartedly, right down to the idiosyncrasies of Quahog and its citizens. The show's characters will be lingering around hot spots to distribute quests, which are thinly veiled around plot points from television episodes (with a relevant clip played after the completion of each quest).

/// **Right now there** doesn't appear to be a huge amount to compel players to stick around the neighbourhood. While the world itself is intricately detailed and brimming with incidental quirks and amusing in-jokes – not to mention some original voice work from the cast – the quests themselves prove to be a swamp of uninspired reruns. A tired routine of killing, collecting and talking, there isn't anything that appear massively engrossing to the quest structure and nary a whiff of variety.

It also lacks some polish in combat, opting for a creaking hotkey system bereft of the necessary depth to really achieve an engaging action experience – and given a significant portion of the quests transform into battle scenarios, it leaves plenty to be desired.

But it's clear even from the beta that *Family Guy* is an MMO that, arguably, is primarily designed to make money. Whether through the interminable iTunes pop-ups, deodorant commercials or the in-game items, there's plenty of ways for the developer and Fox to wring cash from consumers. It's not that this MMO model is objectionable in principle, it's just that in *Family Guy Online*'s current beta state, there's not a huge amount of content that deserves a premium, and the constant ads for the show are just needless preaching to the converted.

Still, Peter Griffin and family still have time to prove themselves a worthy presence in the genre. With some considerate alterations to quest design that can equal the effort injected into the humour and an overhaul on the combat, *Family Guy Online* could easily sidestep criticisms and prove to be more than just a thoughtless novelty.

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Bernd Beyreuther

Head of development, Drakensang Online

After netting a million registered users in the first two months and continuing to go from strength to strength, head of development Bernd Beyreuther talks to **games™** about the success of Drakensang Online and where the MMO is heading in the future

How would you pitch *Drakensang Online* to newcomers unfamiliar with the MMO?
Drakensang Online combines the best game elements of hack-and-slay action-RPGs with MMORPGs, and does so directly free-to-play in the browser, without the hassle of downloading and installing a client. Not only is entering the world of *Drakensang Online* faster than ever before, but the breathtaking, dynamic battles are more intense and epic than in classic MMORPGs. In comparison to action-RPGs, *Drakensang Online* places more emphasis on character development and teamwork, and offers RPG fans a captivating gaming experience in PvE and PvP. The game offers unparalleled graphics for a free-to-play browser experience that is expanded on constantly with significant updates.

How mindful have you been of the original *Dark Eye* role-playing series? How much freedom has it allowed you?
While *Drakensang* originates from a series of games set in the *Dark Eye* world, *Drakensang Online* is set in a new, original game universe, which frees us from a lot of the constraints of an established RPG game world and ruleset.

We're seeing a lot of free-to-play developers taking a firm stance against 'pay to win' microtransactions. What is your take on this, and what functions will microtransactions play in *Drakensang Online*?
Bigpoint has a strong policy against forcing players to spend money to progress in our games. In fact, the majority of our community never pays – and that's fine with us. For a game like this to succeed, there must be a balance. We've been building F2P games for ten years now and have some of the best people and tools in the business to ensure balance and fairness. It's something we monitor on a daily basis. In our experience, players who don't spend money are often better at the game than those who might spend a few dollars for higher-level gear. Experience trumps money any day. Typically, players will spend real money to buy a premium, in-game currency that they can use to buy special items that enable them to progress faster or more conveniently. Players can also earn basic currency in the game.

Do you feel the popularity of the F2P MMO will make it easier or harder to sustain interest in *Drakensang Online*? Are you mindful of the competition?
Competition is good. It elevates the playing field and the genre as a whole. In the future, technical excellence, outstanding content that is updated and expanded frequently and good community relations will be the keys to success in the free-to-play MMO space. Eliminating hurdles like a client download, as we have done with *Drakensang Online*, will also become more and more important. With *Drakensang Online*, we are one of the technical leaders in this space and the constant growth of our registered player base to almost six million users seems to confirm that we are on the right path.

> The really big, successful titles will still be on the market in five years with a substantial player base

Where is the market going in the next five years?
While I'm sure that people are right in saying that online games, social gaming, free-to-play and mobile are the future, the nice thing about gaming is that every two years something happens that truly no one has foreseen. Every new device or platform can upend the whole market – maybe that device will be Google Glasses. Or that mysterious Apple TV. Who knows?

What I am confident to say is that five years will not be a totally gigantic timeframe for the major online games. What I mean to say is that the really big, successful titles will still be on the market in five years with a substantial player base.





Unlike many MMO developers, Bigpoint is happy to allow its community to play without forcing microtransactions upon them.

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